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WHEN I WAS A HARVESTER



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Bob Yates.

WHEN I WAS A HARVESTER

BY
ROBERT L. YATES

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1930



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SET UP BY BROWN BROTHERS LITHOTYPERS
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
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This book is dedicated to the energetic spirit of my sister, Brett Yates, who has taken time and trouble to assist me in compiling this material and who first revealed to me the meaning of the word, adventure: an awakening to the greater possibilities of life.

“BOB” YATES.



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WHEN I WAS A HARVESTER



WHEN I WAS A HARVESTER

CHAPTER ONE

MUCH has been written about the colorful ranches of the West, about lumber camps, and about the ever-romantic sea, but few tales have been told of the great harvesting fields of the Canadian Northwest: regions still uncharted, but producing a quarter of the substance for the world's bread.

It seemed to me that here was a realm of adventure untried, a scene of drudgery equaled only by the ancient picture of the Egyptians constructing their pyramids, lashing slaves on as they built everlasting monuments to the great Pharaohs. Many stand spellbound before those massive piles of stone; few think to give credit to the slaves for them. So, bread is a common commodity on every table, but who gives a thought to the harvesters who make cheap bread possible? Harvesters constitute a race of their own. For the most part they are fine fighters, clean livers, and magnificent cussers—I'd stake my last dollar

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on any one of them at any time; and I want to tell, through this book, something of their lives and characters and work.

It was summer time, mid-August to be exact, and I was seventeen years old. I was having a splendid vacation full of the things that make a regular vacation: golf, and swimming, and dances at the country club on Saturday nights; but I had begun to suspect that just enjoying myself in a charming summer place was hardly all that life could mean for me. I began to wonder what people on the other side of the earth were like; what the men who toiled that the wheels of civilization might keep turning, thought about. And I didn't want things to come easy for me, since I knew they didn't for everyone.

Then one day I saw a poster in a railroad station advertising a harvesters' excursion. It was a picture of a vast land of rolling wheat—golden in the sun, shimmering in the wind. Harvesters' Excursion! Canadian Northwest!! The sound of the words thrilled me. The image created by the picture stirred me, and I got started thinking. Something began singing within me like the secret of a promise, a promise whose long-dreamed-of fulfillment life offers every boy

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when he wants to try himself. I felt keen and confident, and I longed, more than anything else just then, to test my strength and to see whether I really did know myself. The West—that magic land where men go for homesteads or gold or adventure, the land that calls to some spirits and from them never fails to find an answer—the West was calling to me. I went to bed that night dreaming of wheatfields mellow in the sun, of endless toil, of glorious triumph; then thoughts of love and gold and freedom and God got all jumbled in my mind and I *knew* that I must go West! So the next morning I spoke to Dad about my plan.

He nodded, with the wisdom of the years behind him and with the foresight of the years ahead, as I have seen him nod countless times, and said, "Go along, my boy. You're old enough now to try things out for yourself and to know the value of your own ideas. Don't ever be afraid, and come back any time."

So I bundled a couple of old shirts and my razor—a new possession which I was proud of—into a shabby grip and took the train that night for Toronto. I suppose it might almost have been called a polite version of a runaway, for I

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didn't speak to anyone else about my going. This was to be my affair from beginning to end.

That night on the train it all came over me that I wasn't any longer just a youngster growing up, with vacations between periods of school, but that I was part and parcel of working, toiling humanity: one of the millions who labor that progress may go on. And more than this: I was going on an adventure whose success depended solely on my own strength of purpose; into a life of the kind that most people just read about—but I was going to *live* it!

The following morning was clear and bright and hot when I reached the jumping-off place from civilization into the unknown wilderness. There was something magic in the energy of Toronto: that shipping center to the great Northwest. The station was packed with traffic of all varieties, and echoing loudly with humanity. A lively mob of men, and healthy cries of *Ave* and *Vale*. Always in the late summer, when news comes down from the farming regions that grain is ripening and all hands are needed to meet the demands of the harvest, men from every corner of the globe come flocking: bums and tramps as well as gentlemen's sons. Every walk of life is

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presented in heterogeneous mêlée, while a central purpose makes all comrades. The call of adventure and the promise of gold are enough to lure men with courageous bodies and vagrant souls away from the security of homes and cities and the sheltering arms of mothers and wives.

The tremendous Toronto station never held a more motley crowd than on that scorching August day when the first shift of laborers sought the heatfields: divers men of one desire struggling for places on the train. They were all laughing or shouting or swearing; all waving bottles or handkerchiefs as they bade good-by to their sweethearts and families, to everything that stood for civilization, for three months. It might have been a wartime scene, for the women looked strained and sad, as if life were slowly teaching them pain—but the men were joyous and impatient, forgetful of all but the lusty delight of labor, and after that the gold.

As the train was called, the mob pushed forward, wrecking doors and railings in their rush for places, like a herd of stampeding cattle running down everything that obstructs their path. There were ten thousand men in that station and only fifteen hundred could get on the first train!

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Bundles and carpet-bags were thrown through the open windows, to be followed by their owners who crawled through—anything to get a seat! I was lucky enough to find a space in one of the crude cars. Each car had room for eighty passengers, but the seats were of wood, with stiff, board backs. A hard bed for two could be made by pulling out the seats, while the backs folded up to form an equally hard upper berth. Not my idea of comfort, but still, it was transportation to the West—a case of the end justifying the means. At the forward part of the car a built-in stove theoretically supplied warmth, but as we got farther into the North and experienced our first cold nights, we learned to depend upon the natural heat of our bodies to keep the temperature of the car above freezing.

I think it is safe to say that no one slept that first night out from Toronto. The drinking and the singing, with accompaniment from banjos and wheezy accordions, proved excellent rest-dispellers and kept us well entertained. After all, we were just a bunch of fellows going far away from home and all that was dear, and we were trying to forget, by the only means we had at our disposal, that the excitement of the morning had given way

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to the grief of parting. It was just this first night that would be bad, just tonight that we would feel an ache for friends and tenderness and the foolish little things that we could not admit missing except in our own hearts. Tomorrow night these would be dim in our memory, and the West would be nearer, but just now it was best to sing and drink and let comradeship, no matter how rowdy, take the place of regret. All the travelers felt "that-a-way." You could see it in their eyes and in the hasty way they pursued pleasure, afraid that if it ever escaped them they would never capture it again; but nobody said anything about what was going on inside him.

There were three others fellows in the section I had helped myself to, and strangely enough we were to stick together through all the harvesting. One's friends may be found in a jumble, for a thing like friendship imposes no conditions when hearts call and respond. There was Fat, a big guy who didn't know what it was to be sober; and Olsen, a kind-hearted, slow-spoken Swede; and Jimmie, a white-collar kid from behind some drug-store fountain in Toronto. We swapped a few stories and jokes and elaborated incredibly

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on our respective pasts. Then we got tired of trying to make our voices heard above the din and medley of music through the car, so Olsen suggested a poker game. Fat decided that would be a good stunt and yelled an invitation to anyone in the car who had the cash to join in. I began playing a poker game in my mind, trying to think up an excuse to get out of the immediate one, for that was one thing I made certain I would not do: play poker with a bunch of strangers. You see, I did not know yet that these men were to be my pals. So I left them and made my way down to a car in the rear of ours and joined a bunch that were telling stories of Alberta.

I proved an interested listener and I learned a great deal of the life and conditions up there. The thing that impressed upon me what a big world it was that I was going to, was hearing a couple of huskies say that the average population of the prairie provinces was five persons to every ten square miles. I tried to visualize that, but it was pretty hard work.

One tale of revenge, illustrating the men's abhorrence of treachery, struck me particularly. It was a story told by an old-timer whose grizzled beard was stained with tobacco juice and whose

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gnarled paws told in themselves of many years at the harvest. The old fellow began: "Dere was a couple o' fellows, one a teamster and de other a spike pitcher. De teamster did de spike pitcher a dirty trick when he came in oncet wid his load to de trusher and I'll be G—— d—— if dat guy didn't shove de teamster into de feeder! Den de gang dat stood aroun' got so goldarned mad dat dey just took dat pitcher and strung him up on de blower!" The accordions and the jew's-harps tuned up then and I went back to my car, thinking all the time of the miserable devil who had been shoved to death to be chopped up like so much mince-meat, and of the beast dangling by his neck in the prairie-breeze.

Next morning, the men produced strange-looking packages which, on being opened, revealed food. Food! And I was hungry. It was something I had not thought of in the excitement of boarding the train, but which I knew I would appreciate. My friend Olsen advised me to put on a long face and go begging. It was my first shot at acting and, whether I was good at it or the men generous, doesn't matter; the fact remains that I did satisfy a hunger which I had thought insatiable. Olsen advised me to hop off the car

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at the next stop and get some chow from the "Chinks," as all restaurants are called. The majority are Chinese joints and the farther North one goes the more of these one finds. Before the train pulled to a stop, I had hopped off and was soon in a Chink's buying doughnuts, and in a moment back in the car plentifully supplied.

Olsen asked me, "Did you *buy* that food, buddy?"

I nodded and held out a handful of doughnuts.

"Why, you dam' sucker," he said scornfully, "don't you know that nobody ever *pays* for anything at the Chinks'?"

I had learned my first lesson in Northwestern etiquette.

At the next stop, I saw a harvester take the "lend" of a coffee-pot, while others stripped the place of food. I helped and immediately regained all the confidence I had lost as a novice. From then on I felt like a graduate member of the gang, for I had proved that I was without scruple. It seemed to me a doubtful accomplishment, but if it was to be their code of honor I was willing to follow it, for I thoroughly believed in the admonition, "When in Rome——"

Tired from the preceding night's revel, I dozed

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in my sleep, thinking what an awful trip it was up here and how it must be just about the same as hell. My illusions and dreams of adventure were pretty well shattered. Human nature seemed to me gritty and callous. My ideals were tucked away in the back of my heart, for I dared not bring them out here. In forty-eight hours life had become a cussing, swarming mass of male vigor and cunning, not just a passage of time.

I began to do some thinking for the first time in my life, I guess, on just what was real and what wasn't. Two days had gone, and there were two more to go before we got there. If I had known when we started what it was going to be like, I think I should have killed myself rather than go through with it. It seemed to my troubled soul that the crowd was about the worst of any fellows going; none of them had a cent, and they would take all you had if you let them. I thought that, I know now, because I really wasn't one of them yet. I was still just an outsider with an outsider's aching sense of disillusion. However, I graduated into their squad that second night out.

As I slept, a bum slid into the seat beside me. He thought it would be a good time to get my

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money, and it would have been if I had not waked up just in time to see him high-tailing it down the aisle. I couldn't think for a minute; then instinct or something made me feel inside my pocket. It was empty. In a second, it dawned on me that my wallet was gone and with it every penny I had in the world, but also—and this was the disgrace!—that a fellow was getting away from me! I beat it down the aisle and caught him by the neck just as he reached the space around the stove.

He didn't think I could fight, I guess, and started to hit me, but as far as that went he didn't land anything at all. He took a haymaker at me and missed. I jabbed him with my left, crossed with a right, and we closed in. Then I gave him everything I knew: left jabs to the face, right crosses to the body, just as fast as my mitts could work. In two minutes I had him bleeding so you couldn't tell where his eyes were; but he was still game and kept coming back for more, kicking this time. Quite a crowd had collected around us; they yelled when they saw him kick and tried to separate us, but I wanted to have it out. We worried around for about six minutes, then I let my right go as fast as I could. It hit where I started

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it for—right on the button; and he ended up where I intended he should—kissing the canvas. I got my wallet from his pocket and went back to my seat. He was taken off the train at the next station and that was the end of him. No one ever tried to swipe my money after that.

From then on I was sitting pretty. Everybody in the train came up to me, and by the time another day had gone I felt that I had a speaking acquaintance with every bum on earth. That fight gave me more confidence in myself than anything else in my life, up to that time. As soon as those fellows knew that I wouldn't take a licking they all wanted me to go with their bunches, and I finally went with one gang of good fellows—the ones I had started out with. They all tried to sign me up to give them boxing lessons, and I made quite a little money in my spare time during the season doing that.

The fight, which I had never dreamed of having, gave me a fine standing with those fellows. That is the great point about a bunch of thugs: when they see that you can hold your own and not take any back talk from anybody, they immediately let you in with the gang and give you the name of "buddy."

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The train trip wore on, getting more boring every day, as anyone knows who has traveled a long distance in a day coach—but this was a coach of board seats with stiff, board backs! I think by then I had forgotten what a pillow felt like. Waking up on the morning of the fourth day, I saw Fat with more than half of his heavy body out of the window, yelling:

“Winnipeg! Winnipeg! Hot mamma! Here's where I get my good old Calgary beer.”

It certainly gave me a thrill, for I knew then that I was at last in the Northwest, and too, it was wonderful to see civilization again after being for days in the bush.

We pulled into Winnipeg before noon with every harvester in the car halfway out of the windows, yelling and hooting. I was surprised to see what a white and modern city Winnipeg is—this sprawling child of the prairies that had become the gateway to the vast wheatfields of the West. There were fine, tall skyscrapers there, and paved streets, and every citizen was a born booster. The first one I ran across told me, before we had talked for many minutes, of the wonders of Winnipeg's climate. He boasted that out of the three hundred and sixty-five days in

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the year, three hundred and thirty were cloudless. I suppose he is right. Anything is right up there. With so much space on all sides, there is room only for rightness! He also told me that Winnipeg would soon be the greatest city in the world. I did not dispute him, for it is surely now a great city. It is the neck of the bottle, as it were, for the entire grain-producing area, and every car-load of wheat bound East must pass here to be graded. Winnipeg alone holds the key that can unlock all the wealth of Western produce. At the finish, my new-found friend said to me, clapping me on the shoulder:

"Come to Winnipeg, my boy. It is a young city in a young country and the youth of the world should settle here."

It's true.

The bunch were just like a lot of kids. Every fellow felt so relieved to get off that lousy train and stretch his legs a bit. A few minutes after we got off, we headed for a ticket office. There was a big sign in front of it that said:

HARVESTERS' EXCURSIONS

HALF A CENT A MILE

Third Class

CALGARY MOOSEJAW REGINA

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Fat said, "Moosejaw." Somebody else said, "Swift-current." We finally bought tickets for Sintaluta and made our way through the station to another train while Fat ran out and bought a dozen bottles of beer.

Back in the train again and headed West for a place called Sintaluta (which probably no one outside of Saskatchewan has ever heard of), we did our best with the beer. After a while I thought about the geography I had covered in the past week: beginning with the civilized areas; then north from Toronto; through "the bush," that mysterious-sounding region of water and forest and muskeg which the Canadian wilderness is so largely composed of; then on over the rolling, tireless plains, the unending prairies where the railroad with its thin iron streak has supplanted the trails of the buffalo and other roaming herds. And that was not so very long ago, either, for the first railroad only went through in 1885. So finally into Saskatchewan—that greatest province of a great Dominion, renowned for its wheat—and where there is not wheat there are forest and water. After having spent most of my life in cities, it's small wonder that a place like Saskatchewan should excite me.

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We made Sintaluta, four hundred miles west of Winnipeg, at three A.M. It was cold and there wasn't a light in the town. I had been wondering whether my bed for the remainder of the night was to be better or worse than the boards on the train. It almost became a game to me to wonder what *could* be worse. Then when I saw the town I decided that it would probably be far worse, for the place was to all appearances deserted and there didn't seem to be a chance of our renting a room anywhere. But Western custom has provided for such situations. "Walk in and take your pick" is the unwritten invitation in their hotels. I had no qualms about taking the bridal chamber, feeling that if anyone wanted to dispute my claims he could in the morning, but for the present I intended to sleep. Had I known then that six hours was more sleep than I would get again at a single stretch for some three months, I think I might have stayed there all day.

At last I had arrived! The thought thrilled me. But as I fell asleep I was troubled: if the farmers who hired the bunch didn't like me, what would I do? Then reassurance came with self-reliance: I knew that from now on everything

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depended on me. My hands and my back, must do their part, my spirit must carry me through or I would be branded a failure.

CHAPTER TWO

NEXT morning I was awakened by a great clatter—the breakfast gong! I couldn't have dressed any faster if the hotel had been on fire, and I was downstairs almost before the bell had stopped echoing. It was to be my first real Western breakfast and, by all the signs and portents within me, I was going to do justice to it. It proved to be about the size and content of one of our dinners, but that didn't cramp my style any. There was every kind of fried thing imaginable: potatoes and ham and chicken and wheat cakes. I attended to all of them. Then there was thick, black coffee with an aroma so strong and penetrating that it roused me quickly from any stray sleepiness; and a pitcher, the size of a water jug, full of cream with golden clots of butter floating on the top. I was glad that I could still console myself with the excuse that I was a growing boy and so could just go on eating, unashamed of how much I was putting away.

It seemed to me that most of the men swal-

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lowed their food and ran, so I asked Fat (who believed in taking his time over the better things) why everyone was eating so rapidly.

"Kid," he said between mouthfuls, "the big idea is to get yer grub under yer belt and beat it into the town, 'cause the farmers are all there waitin' to hire men."

"Let's go together, Fat," I suggested, knowing already how sweet comradeship was in this unknown world.

"You said it, kid."

We got up from the table with our hands full of rolls and doughnuts, and our pockets bulging suspiciously. Just as we got out on to the street, Olsen stuck his head out of one of the upper windows and asked us where we were going.

"To get hired," Fat called up to him.

"Say, wait—I'm coming, too."

And Olsen came—flying down the stairs and out on to the street with his shirt-tails flying behind him.

"Say, didn't yer ma ever tell you those things go inside yer pants?" Fat asked, while he tucked the shirt-tails into Olsen's trousers and I stuffed a doughnut between his teeth.

Then we walked down the street together,

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joshing and swearing, feeling as if we owned the world.

There were men lined up on both sides of the wide, dusty street, waiting for farmers to come along and pick them. The old hands just stood there, chewing their tobacco as quietly as cows their cud, seeing who could out-distance the other spitting into the street. The new ones looked nervous. Sometimes they lit cigarettes, but I noticed they didn't seem to smoke them through. The old ones pushed their caps back on their heads. The new ones pulled theirs over their eyes. Old or new—they were all rough, tough, unshaven huskies from the highways and byways of the country. Here and there a misfit from behind counter or desk looked pale and uneasy, as if wondering why he had come.

We were all new at the game, so we tried to look as tough as possible when we got into line. Olsen nudged me and offered me a quid off his square of 'baccy. I bit off a generous chunk. It tasted filthy, but I went on chawing, feeling that my future success depended on the degree of toughness I acquired and maintained.

The farmers, slowly working down the street between lines, reminded me of captains choosing

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teams for a ball game. Each one was trying to get the best and strongest men. Some looked at a fellow's muscle; others looked at his eyes—and those were the ones who chose the best. I guess they figured that the spirit behind a man's eyes counted for more in the end than a bulge on his arm.

It wasn't long before an old weather-beaten man came up to me and said, "I'll put ye on, lad, for forty cents an acre."

That sounded good to me so I said, "Sure, but what about these guys?"

The farmer looked shrewdly at Fat and Olsen, then he spat and walked away. After a minute or two he looked back and said, "Well? What are ye waiting for? Didn't I tell ye all to come along?"

We followed him.

He stowed us away in the back of a Ford truck with a couple of Russians who soon made us understand that they did not speak our language. Then with a bang and a jump or two, the truck hopped ahead and rattled down the street, lined more sparsely now with laborers.

The prairie town of Sintaluta was soon left

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behind and we were heading over a dusty and unbending road to a farm five miles away. Every bit of the way lay through a country where wheat waved goldenly on both sides of us. Sitting on the rear end of the truck with my legs hanging over the side and the country fleeing behind me, I couldn't see anything but the vanishing arrow of the road prisoned by walls of gold, and redundant infinities of sky, sky so blue that it almost made me want to cry. I guess we were all a little stunned by this strange new world of natural wealth, for we were silent. I tried to construct a map of Canada in my mind, and on it all I could see was this great area from the Red River Valley to the Rockies which was an inland sea of gold; a sea with tiny islands of neat and thriving homesteads; a sea whose buoys and lighthouses were the windmills, those pennons of civilization, proclaiming that water has been found; and where water is, there is productivity; a sea that yielded some half-billion bushels of wheat every year! I thought of all the country west of Winnipeg—six million acres of land abounding with wheat and foodstuffs, the greatest grain-growing section on earth, and so new and young—like a richly endowed boy or girl with all the unbounded prom-

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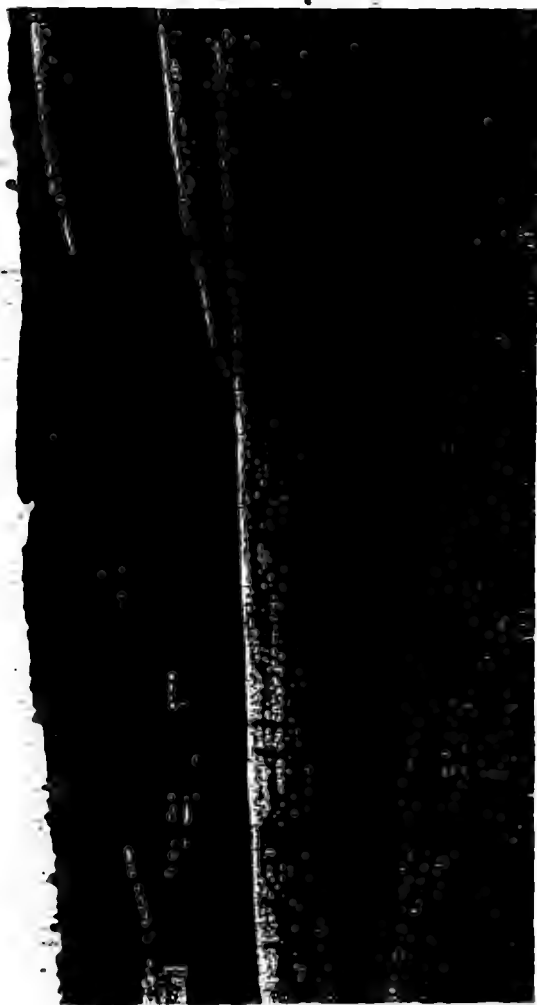
ise of Life ahead! It made me feel awfully religious.

Suddenly the truck swerved off the road and down a side lane.

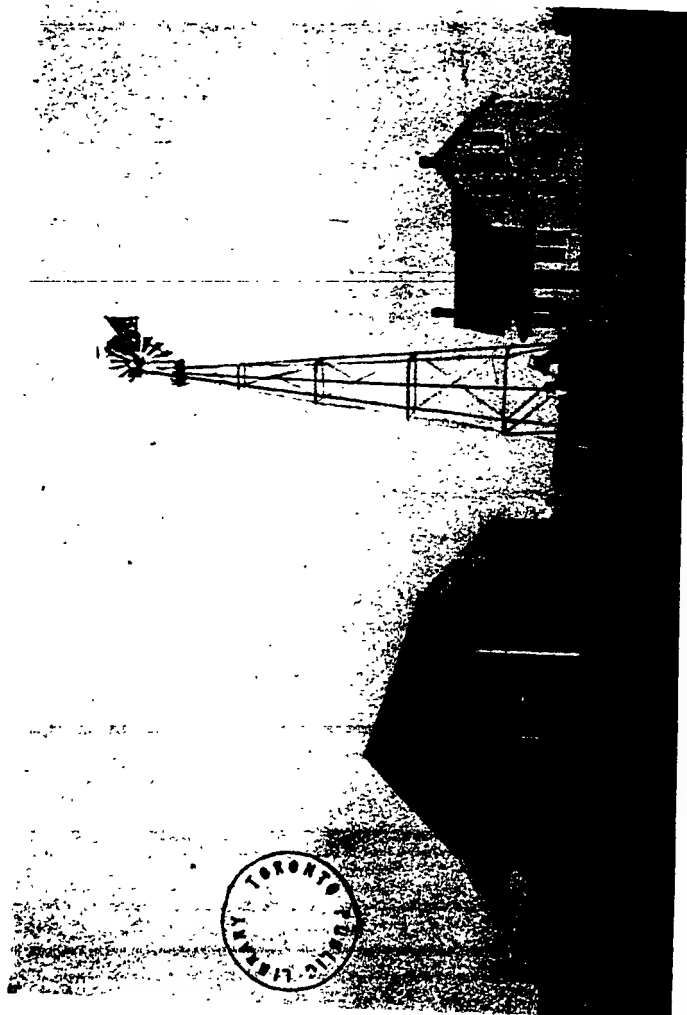
"Well, here we are," the farmer called, pulling to such a sudden stop that I fell off the back end and landed on the ground of the barnyard.

It was about noon, so our boss called us into the kitchen. His wife gave us a half an apple pie and a quart of milk apiece, then we started in to work about twelve-thirty on a one-hundred-and-fifty-acre field that had to be stooked. There were only five of us in the bunch and it looked like a job for eternity. I began willingly enough, but about four o'clock my back and the sun got the best of me. I was feeling pretty seedy and decided that manual labor such as that was no fun but all hard going.

We quit at six-thirty and I guess I was about the sorest man on the harvest that night, and sore at myself too, because I knew I could never make any money at forty cents an acre. Why, conditions might be such sometimes that it would take a man all day to do one acre! Fat and Olsen had already made up their minds to quit, and I decided that about the best thing for me to do was go



An inland sea of gold.



The windmill proclaimed that water had been found.

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along with them. So all three of us hoofed it back into Sintaluta. By the time I got into bed in my bridal suite I was ready to laugh at myself for being such a greenhorn as to accept the old boy's offer of forty cents an acre. I certainly wouldn't have trotted along with him so willingly, and taken my pals, too, had I known what a one-hundred-and-fifty-acre field could do to you. The West was teaching me slowly.

This is a good place in my story to describe a Northwestern town to the reader. When I first saw Sintaluta, for example, it reminded me of a scene in a vaudeville, for the stores and hotel looked just as if they were propped up for a stage setting. The buildings out West are made very light, so if they do get in the way of a hurricane of any kind and blow over they can just be set up again. They are built as cheaply as possible, since under any conditions they would not be able to stand the strong winds. It is all in the day's work up there, when a cyclone comes ripping across the prairie and topples the whole town over, to have the townspeople emerge from their cellars and set the shacks up again. This, of course, is true only of the very small towns.

A few shacks and a store, all within a short

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radius of the railroad station, make up a Western town. One can usually stand in the very center of the cluster of dwellings and look out into the prairie land beyond, where a few isolated farm-houses look like tiny wooden match boxes set on end. The sense of space everywhere makes human efforts seem frail by comparison; for as these little match boxes are approached, they make themselves known as quite sturdy ranch buildings and barns. When one can see too much prairie land from the center of the town, it often gives one a feeling of intense despair, for the town seems to be only an insignificant human attempt in a wilderness of loneliness.

There were no sidewalks in Sinaluta—just one wide, dirty street with a hitching rail in front of the hotel to tie the broncos and ponies to. Somewhere along this casual street, there was an old and harmless sign nailed to a tree, bearing the legend "Please Do Not Spit on the Sidewalks." Sidewalks! Either exaggerated euphemism, or else the town fathers had a sense of humor, for I defy anyone to find the line of demarcation where street and sidewalk meet. Under one's feet there is only a brownish soil that depends upon the rains for cleansing. But I think that

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long ago one of the early settlers brought that sign from a prosperous city, thinking that the civilized injunction would make the town progressive.

The pool-room is a conspicuous feature in any Western town. It is the most popular as well as the only meeting-place, and is always crowded with men drinking beer, playing snooker, or just passing the time of day. This rendezvous has invariably a lurid name, reminiscent of Nick Carter novels, painted in crude letters on its slat sides. Sometimes it is the "Merry Widow Bar," "Jim's Place," the "Bamboo Rendezvous," or the "Silver Dollar Saloon." It always bears a name, though I have never heard one spoken of by its name.

When the town boasts a few shacks and does not have to concentrate all its activities in the general store and the pool-room, many buildings will bear inscriptions showing their respective functions: Tonsorial Parlor, Queen Mary's Millinery Shoppe, Bailey's Bowling Alley. If the town has streets instead of one wide road through the middle of it, it is a *city*; but the streets ultimately end, even as the road does, in the prairie—that endless, sun-baked stretch of land, glaring cruelly

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in the fine weather and circulating a whitish dust on windy days.

It would be hard to tell one town from another in Saskatchewan, consisting as each does of a Chink restaurant, a hotel, a post-office, a pool-room, and a general store. Any further amenities denote a larger population. There is only one way to tell how big a town is in the Northwest: walk into the pool-room and count the tables, then draw your own conclusions.

After a night's sleep and a good feed the next morning, we all hired out to a more prosperous-looking farmer named Mack, for four dollars a day. He drove us out to his ranch, some twelve miles north of Sintaluta, which he said proudly was the largest in Saskatchewan. I understand, though, that every landowner with ten or twenty thousand acres under his name claims the distinction given by that superlative. I have never heard of a ranch smaller than two thousand acres, nor do they ever exceed about forty thousand; more than that would be too much for a man to handle. It was long after noon when we arrived there, so Mack told us to take the day easy and look around a bit. There wasn't anything to see but two barns and a house and a windmill and; of

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course—wheat! Wheat as far as your eye could travel, some of it cut, most of it still standing. I for one was pretty glad to sit around and rest my weary bones, which were stiff and sore from the previous day's labor.

When the fellows came in from the field that evening, we were surprised and glad to see that Jimmie, the white-collar kid of the train, was with them. Now all our gang was together again. Mrs. Mack gave us a fine supper and afterward everyone was ready to go to the bunkhouse and get into bed. I fell into a sound sleep and seemed to wake up only a minute after from a dig in the ribs by a husky Dane, who called out:

"Daylight in the muddy swamps, skimmers out!"

Only he made *swamps* rhyme with *tramps*.

The sun had not risen yet and the world outside the bunkhouse looked bleak and forbidding to me. The vagueness and uncertainty of the dusky dawn got my nerve. I didn't even feel hungry, which was a bad sign; but, like it or not, there was no choice now. We had a good breakfast (which I managed to tuck away) and at six-thirty left for the "muddy swamps." We paired up and started to stook wheat. For a while I enjoyed myself and actually began to relish the

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work that had seemed like such a Herculean task the day before. The time passed rapidly till I began to get ravenously hungry.

Did I run when the boss yelled "Twelve o'clock! All hands off!"? I'll say I did. I got to the cook car ahead of everyone else and sat down to dinner. And what a dinner! It took quite a while just to look over the food, and when I began to eat it seemed to me like the best meal I had ever had, but perhaps that was because I was so hungry. It consisted mainly of roast steer with gravy, almost a bushel of potatoes, Java (~~coffee~~), plenty of salve (butter), and lots of punk (bread). That may not sound so good to the reader, but sound and taste are pretty different things, especially when you're hungry. The trouble with me seemed to be that we were never given enough time to eat, but after a while I learned to speed up my eating to the point where I could finish at the same time as the rest of the bunch.

The day was only half over, but when I got up from the table I felt stiff and tired and wished in my heart that night would come. I guess everyone felt that-a-way, for we were all so new at it. Nevertheless, we went out to the battleground.

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and started to stand up wheat again. I found that I was getting more and more like a professional (or rather, an old hand), and that encouraged me. I could take the work a little easier and, of course, accomplish more; so, although my heart was heavy, the afternoon went far better than the morning. When we knocked off and went back to the ranch house, I wasn't even hungry yet. The supper was not nearly so heavy as the dinner, but it consisted of the same ingredients—range beef and potatoes—only not in such quantities as at noon, and tea that was so strong it made me jump. In the evening, I truly felt like a man with full claim to a man's rights, for the hardest day's work of my life (so far) lay behind me.

My first night spent as a Veteran Harvester in a bunkhouse on wheels was as enjoyable as any civilized party. The bunkhouse is long and narrow, with bunks lining the walls and stove in the middle. We gathered around the stove, for a true farmer never feels quite comfortable unless his feet are toasting on a slab of hot iron, whatever the weather outside. Then we did what in Western parlance is called "making music." The Dane produced a seedy concertina that managed to wheeze out the tunes, and we had for accompa-

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niment banjos played by two Canucks. We all joined in on the choruses, sometimes singing the whole of any song we knew.

We sang that night until we were hoarse, such harvesters' favorites as "The Cowboy's Legend," "Nancy Brown," "Rose Marie," "It Ain't Gonna Rain No More," "Old Mr. Finnigan," "O Canada"—on and on, repeating them over and over again. We were then just a bunch of tired kids whose greatest thrill lay in hearing something we knew and then going over it again. When your body aches and your head can't think, the repetition of a well-known air is about the only thing that can soothe you and make you feel pleasant toward the world.

I found myself dozing away too often so I got up and went to bed, the din of the music making the sweetest lullabies a tired man could wish. I slept without even taking my boots off, true harvester-fashion for the season.

Promptly at five-thirty the next morning, the Dane woke us up with his "Daylight in the muddy swamps, skimmers out!" which phrase was our alarm on each succeeding morning. Upon asking him what this meant, he replied rather cryptically:

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"Wal, ya see, I bane workin' in the bush and the skinners gotta git out first."

Although very stiff and sleepy, I felt ready, almost eager, to tackle the second day, knowing now that I could stand the work.

CHAPTER THREE

OUR bunkhouse had been a freight car once, until the trucks were taken off and large wagon wheels put in their place so that it could be drawn over the prairie by eight light horses and, incidentally, made a habitation for men. The side doors had been boarded up and one door cut in the end. The stove was in the middle and burned wood, but was almost always out or just going out, the harvesters being either too tired or too lazy to keep the fire stoked. The walls were very thin, so at night when the stove went out for good, the car became as cold as outdoors; but it was hard to tell which was worse: cold or stench. For with the stove burning, the place got stifling and had the worst odor imaginable. The Northwest's idea of a clean man is the fellow who takes a bath once a year, after the harvest. So, what with that fragrance and the steam from the tobacco juice which kept the sides of the stove damp, there was little to be desired in the line

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of olfactory sensation; but my nose got used to anything after a while.

The bunks built along the walls were big enough for one, but used for two. There were upper and lower accommodations. As the men say, "You sleep on a razor-edge and are thankful for it." I learned to fall into a deep slumber the minute I hit my board and not to move during the night. Mornings, we jumped down out of the car, broke the ice (when there was any) in the barrel of rain-water that stood by the door, washed our hands and ducked our heads. For breakfast we had exactly the same thing that we had at the other meals: beef and potatoes, Java and punk. The cook car was smaller, being only about thirty-six feet long, and had a big stove and two tables in it. The cook put the food in bowls from which the men helped themselves. There was always plenty. The cook car as well as the bunkhouse could have horses attached to it, and both were moved over the prairie to the place where the men were working at the time.

There is no other place on the continent, I feel sure, where a more interesting or worthy group of men can be found than in this section of northern Canada. During the harvest, that is for

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about three months out of the year, there are concentrated in this one area thousands of men from every corner of the globe. They give the best that is in them to give—muscle and courage. They toil and sweat. Then they disperse again; back to their corners, gone—only God knows where—like dust scattered by the wind, but their wind is the wanderlust.

Our bunkhouse alone represented several nationalities. Out of twenty men the majority were Canadians, the rest being French Canucks, Swedes, Englishmen, a Dane, three Dutchmen and two Greeks. Fat and I were the only fellows from the States. They were men of diverse individualities, and many were the curious characters. Some were beasts, but these were the small minority.

Jeff Olsen, who had come down from Newfoundland, seemed to me the most engaging of the lot. His hands were more like great paws than anything else, and his body was a huge but pliant bulk of muscle. He had traveled twice around the world and in his travels had had his arms and chest tattooed. On his torso were written the names of cities all over the globe, together with an assortment of flags, daggers and girls.

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On his arms were written in Swedish two verses from the Bible. It must have been at untold pain to himself that this was done, and it must have taken a great deal of time, but he is very proud of those limbs with their strange lettering. He cannot read, but he knows those verses by heart. They constitute his library and his religion. Perhaps he is wiser than most, for he has made portable his most treasured possessions, and for the rest of us such things can't usually be carried around.

Olsen once translated the verses for me, and their simplicity and poignancy made a great impression on me. On his right arm was a verse from a psalm (78:25): "*Man did eat angels' food: He sent them meat to the full.*" I didn't understand it exactly; maybe it meant more in the Swedish Bible than its English translation implied; but still, there was something about Olsen's husky, understanding heart that said he had fellowship with angels; and I know that he relied upon his God alone to give him "*meat to the full.*" On his left arm he bore six words from Job (6:13): "*Is not my help in me?*" And wasn't it like Olsen to know that his help *was* in him? Olsen had discovered in his simple way that by search-

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ing through one's self one could find all that was needed. He never relied upon outside things, but always communed with his own soul and felt self-reliant.

He was a big fellow and always good-natured, but like the rest of the men he carried a sheath knife which, under pressure, he could use with considerable dexterity. Up North, when a fellow wants a smoke he rolls his own. Jeff could roll a butt like lightning. He made one motion of it and it seemed the easiest thing in the world, like a sleight-of-hand performer doing a trick so difficult that it looks simple. No man out there led a cleaner life than Jeff Olsen did. Out of all the scum and riff-raff, he was the one who could be trusted. It meant a lot to me to have Jeff up there. He exemplified all the sturdy qualities a man should have and, in addition, he had another happy faculty which kept him greatly in demand: telling endless yarns. Sometimes they were about his experiences, of which he'd had enough to fill an encyclopedia; usually they were just about life in general.

I want to be like him in a lot of ways, and I hope I'll run across him some day, somewhere. I probably will, too, for there is a saying in the

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North that bad pennies some time or other roll into the same groove. Almost anyone would call a bunch of tramps and bums like us bad pennies, so I guess I'll find myself rolling along beside Jeff Olsen again—somewhere. There's always some Back of Beyond where tramps can meet each other.

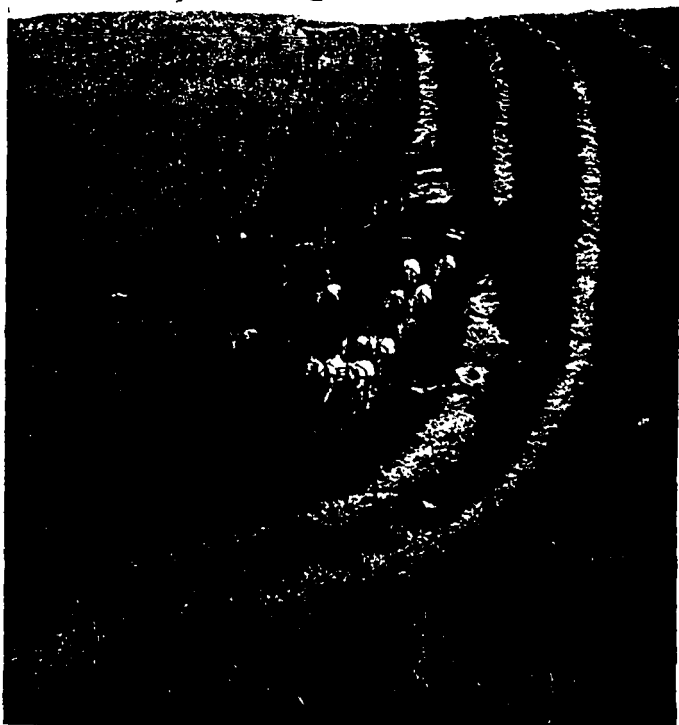
Fat, whom I have frequently mentioned, was another novel character. He seemed to me the nearest thing to a gorilla outside a zoo. He weighed two hundred and fifty pounds, but was remarkably light on his feet, while hair covered his body like a thick mat. When he laughed, his great frame trembled and the noise would shake the bunkhouse. And there was always something for Fat to laugh at. His humor was the most contagious thing I ever knew. Wherever Fat was you could be sure that everyone was feeling pretty good, and thinking that stooking or drinking or sleeping, whatever it might be, was all right. He could hold more beer than any other man in Saskatchewan, and when there was any within a mile he was sure to be drinking heavily. But he was one of the hardest workers on the ranch.

Jimmie completed our gang. He was a good

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guy but we all felt a little sorry for him. He was such a kid and he didn't seem to know anything about life and things like that. He'd been brought up in an orphan asylum, and as soon as he was eighteen had got a job as a drug-store clerk. But you know yourself that flipping sodas all day and doing up little bundles of powder and perfume is no life for a man. After three years of that he began to cough. They told him he couldn't keep his job any more, that a drug store wouldn't have any customers if the clerk was coughing all the time. Jimmie had heard the legend of generous pay in the wheat country, and it was then harvest time, so he signed up and came North. He wanted to make some money so he could marry a little girl back in Toronto, and he also wanted to get hold of his health.

Jimmie once showed me a picture of his girl. It was while we were out in the field and had stopped for a few moments to rest. He pulled it out of his sweaty blouse and held it up in the sunlight. She had hair like the wheat and one of those nice smiles. She looked as if she loved him a lot. Jimmie said her eyes were blue like the flax that they raise alongside of the wheat, and that was why he could stand the hard work—



*When the grain ripens overnight the rancher must have
plenty of workers.*



Six million acres of land abounding in wheat.

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because he found her so often and so easily out there in those golden acres with her shining hair and flower eyes. She was a little manicurist in a hotel in Toronto and her name was Daisy.

Jimmie had a good voice and he used to sing to us evenings when we gathered around the stove in the bunkhouse. But there was something awfully lonely about his voice. Jimmie had never known what home was. Oh, of course, he'd seen the word stuck up in gilt letters over the orphan asylum door, but he never knew what it meant, and that sort of made a sadness in his singing. We all liked Jimmie. He was a good kid, but his cough didn't get any better.

So far I have said nothing about the work, for I wanted to bring it in all at once and make it seem real to the reader.

This country—that is, the prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta—is a country engaged in one single industry: wheat-raising. There are some twelve million acres under production, and the average acre of Canadian wheat yields from thirty to forty bushels, much more than in the East on account of the land being virgin. That makes an annual yield of, roughly, about four hundred million bushels, and this crop

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constitutes about one-fifth of the total agricultural production of Canada. Every year shows an increase and, of course, from the farmer's point of view, the crops are always going to be better and there are bumpers always ahead. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the potentialities of the Dominion are far greater than its present production.

The fields are plowed early in the spring and lie fallow for a long enough time to let the sun warm the earth that is thoroughly moist and friable from the heavy winter snows. The planting is then done, by drills and tractors, and after that the farmers have not a great deal to do (except worry about the crop) until mid-August when the harvesting commences. When the wheat is ripe it must be cut. Wheat allowed to remain standing will spoil more quickly than anything else; if wet, it will deteriorate; if left too long, it will hull while being harvested. There is always the possibility of a rain that will lay down the heavy stalks as if they had been gone over with a flat-iron. An early frost may come along and nip all the precious promise and fulfillment of labor. A farmer's life is as full of chances as a gambler's. I do not wonder that farmers' faces are lined,

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for those whose lives swing between weather and hard luck live more deeply than others.

So, when the wheat is ripe it is cut immediately. Hence the tremendous demand for labor. All hands present are employed, and thousands are imported. The railroads and the government combine in offering reduced rates and the inducement of high wages, for much of the wealth and most of the pride of the Dominion depend upon the safe harvesting of the wheat crop.

Sometimes a man's wheat will ripen overnight, and unless he has his workers on the spot he may lose the best of his crop. Sometimes a farmer will delay his cutting by one day, and that night a storm will come and lay low the heavy stalks with their burden of golden grains—and all will be lost. It is a land where tragedies and blessings abound side by side, for the storm that destroys one man's wheat, which was too advanced, may hasten the growth of his neighbor's, which, owing to a late planting, has been retarded.

Nowadays, if any factory hand were told to go on a fourteen-hour shift, he would most likely quit his job at once; or if he felt rebellious at the capitalistic régime that dictated such hours, he might instigate a strike. But the harvesters

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took fourteen hours as a matter of course and thought nothing of it. While we were stooking, we worked from five-thirty A.M. to six-thirty P.M., since the grain could not be set up after dark. But we had things easy during that period. Those hours were to be remembered as leisure when compared with what was to follow!

Let me explain about stooking. Those of you who have seen binders on a small farm know that they have bundle-carriers, so the driver can drop the bundles at regular intervals. But the binders in the great wheat regions have no bundle-carriers; they drop the wheat as soon as it is cut and made into a bundle. This means that the stookers have to pick up single bundles and carry them to a place for the shock. After I had been stooking for some time, I became able to throw a bundle twelve feet and have it stand up straight. Stooking itself is the process of stacking a number of sheaves on end and together, placing one or two on top to shed rain.

When we started out in the morning, the thermometer would usually register about thirty-five degrees (in late September, twenty) and there was always an early north wind blowing across the prairie. About eight o'clock, when the sun

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rode high in the sky, the drab figures—bending and then walking—would almost seem to blossom in the sun. For their costumes changed from the dull blue of overalls and jumpers to a flaming red: the men had stripped to their red flannels! Soon the prairie would bake under a scorching sun. And there were no hills, no trees or ravines, no shade of any sort, nothing but the blinding glare of the sunlight on the golden wheat. We quit work at twelve and then walked to the cook car for dinner. The rest was short, but it was welcome. After a huge meal, consumed in about twenty minutes, we went back to work under a sun higher than ever in the heavens, that made the earth feel as if it might ignite at any moment. Interminable hours of endless labor passed, and darkness finally came, and with it a chilling breeze. Darkness meant an end to toil, and we learned to love it and to watch over the prairie for the first harbinger of twilight. Back to the cook car we tramped for another meal of stringy beef and potatoes. Then, after listening to the Dane's concertina or playing snooker, to bed at about nine o'clock, and glad of it. That was our program of daily activity. Sometimes the hours were longer, but they were never shorter.

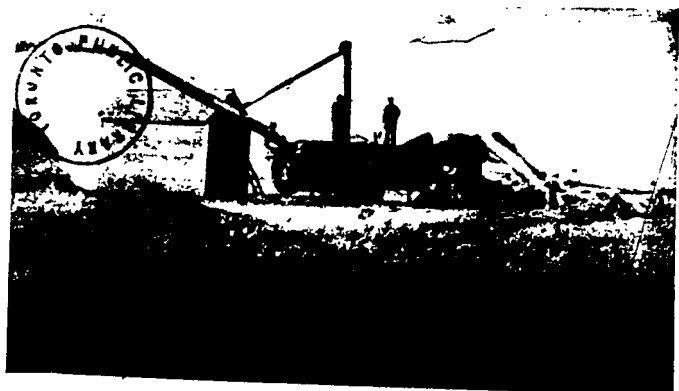
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It was a queer thing, but often out on the prairie we felt and smelt a sea wind. No one ever could, or to my knowledge ever has been able to, account for it. Perhaps it was just because we were so far from the sea that we imagined it to be near, the way the human mind will create about it what it hungers for. Perhaps it was because we were so many men, caught in the harvest's great machine, and since the sea (that unattainable!) spelt freedom and escape, we likened the wind to salt breezes. Who knows? It doesn't matter. It was a thrilling and relieving sensation, whatever the reason for it.

The work was drudgery of the worst sort—there is no denying that—but it did not take me many days to discover that a worker's sense of loyalty to his task can make a passion of any toil. Those on the outside, hearing of the harvest, might quail at the terrors such work implies; but we on the inside, who were part of it, could only feel a terrible pride in our jobs. And I wonder if there is anything in the world that can give one a greater thrill than harvesting wheat that is to feed the hungry in the form of bread? There is food for the spirit in manual labor done in primitive surroundings: it may exhaust the



The prairie was baking under a scorching sun.



Cutting time and threshing time.

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body, but it creates the soul. No green pastures and still waters were here, but fields of stiff wheat, aching distances of prairie, and turgid northern rivers; yet surely the table in the wilderness was spread forth as nowhere else!

Bread for the hungry! That phrase became an echo within me that could spur me on no matter how my arms and hands cried for release from toil, and my legs yearned to be freed from their vise of weariness. Bread for the hungry! There were many things about the work that made me think, and many things that constantly thrilled me, all of which made it easier to do. My body might ache, but my heart was never heavy any more; for I had found a leaven for my labor in giving a meaning to my days: *bread for the hungry!*

I have heard it said that youth untried is strong and can stand almost anything. I do not think it is because of its untriedness, but rather because when one is young one can keep a sense of wonder about everything. I forgot to ache when I let the magnificence of which I was part possess me. There was no misery in toil that had a meaning to it. The marvelous alchemy of grain, growing from seed to sprout, to wheat, to bread,

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to energy for men, filled me with a sense of awe before the splendid achievements of Nature. I was proud to be a servitor of such a mistress. To me the Northland seemed Man's battleground against elemental foes—foes as old as the world, which even the heroic inventions of machinery cannot conquer, but only Man himself; and where men have fought and won out, men will always fight and win out.

I hadn't been working on Mack's acres a week when I ran into some excitement. One evening we were sitting around the stove in the bunkhouse, all of us pretty tired, too tired even to make music or talk—so we just sat there. We were new at the game; for the novices as well as the old-timers it was the first real work-out of the year, and our arms and legs were aching as a result. Mack had more acres under harvest than any of his neighbors, and fewer men to work them, but as he paid us all nearly double what the other farmers did we had no objection to working longer hours. Well, there was the gang of us sitting around the stove on an August night, when a knock came on the door. We jumped. It was so still and so late that the break into our weary silence startled us. The knock was immediately

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followed by the entrance of a big, burly harvester. He looked sullenly at us as if ready to pick a fight with anyone. I recognized him as having been on the train with us coming up, and remembered that on that morning in Sintaluta he had hired out to a man whose lands lay adjacent to Mack's. I did not know why he bore the strange name of "Blackeye Magee," but I soon found out.

He glanced around angrily at our gang, then he came up to me. "Kid, I s'pose ya think ya can knock my block off 'cause ya did that guy's on the train."

I had almost forgotten the episode on the train. "Why, I never thought much about it," I said, trying to keep cool.

"Well, s'posin' ya try!"

I had not realized it was a challenge until his glowering lips puckered and he spat at my feet. No one whose blood is red will ignore that insolent act of defiance.

"All right," I answered, getting up slowly, wishing my muscles didn't ache so much.

Magee started out of the bunkhouse. I saw a gang of his own crew waiting for him outside and they were tough-looking articles. I guess he

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figured that if the fight went into a brawl between the two camps his would make a fair showing. I stayed in the bunkhouse a moment to strip. Olsen and Fat came up to me. Olsen said, "Youngster, he's a hellcat. Don't go at him." Fat protested, too, "Say, that guy won a championship a couple o' years ago. Let him off, kid."

"Well, if it's going to be murder, it's my own, isn't it?" I said, angry at my pals for trying to keep me out of a good thing.

"All right, then——" Olsen replied, "but if you don't give him hell, I'll give it to you."

"Kill him, buddy," was Fat's advice, and I wanted to, by then.

We went out into the barn. The men had cleared an open space and were grouped around it; Magee's camp on one side, Mack's on the other. There was an oil lantern hanging from a beam directly over the improvised ring. It cast fantastic shadows on the swarthy faces of the men, some confident, others worried. I sat down on a box in one corner and Olsen rubbed me, trying to get some of the stiffness out of toil-worn arms and legs. Blackeye Magee finished stripping and sat down opposite me. One glance at

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his brute body and angry eyes was enough to set me on my guard.

"A clever man can beat a slugger any day," I kept saying to myself, and suddenly my legs were tired no longer. My arms itched with the punch behind them.

Old Pete Dunweely, who had been a fighter in his day, was to act as referee. He stepped out to the center of the ring.

"Come on, boys," he said.

We came from our respective corners, converging under the lamplight: two stripped men, muscles tingling.

I held out my hands to square off, the way one does in a listed fight; but Magee disregarded that formality. Pete rang the cow-bell and Magee, ripping in, caught me with my left extended and my right off guard. A vicious punch, and in that first second I was down. Magee's camp howled. Pete Dunweely stood over me. "One—two—" he started. I stayed on one knee to take the benefit of the count, for I was feeling pretty groggy. At *nine* I got up and began dancing around Magee—anything to give me time to clear my head. Then he lunged forward and we clinched like a

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square knot. He pushed me back and with a smart clip raised a mouse on my ear. I came back and we feinted around for a while, Magee raining punches all over me and dazzling me by his fists and his footwork. He was starting quite a garden of cauliflowers, knowing better than anyone else what wonderful size they would grow to by harvest time. I kept pedaling around him, trying to time a good swift uppercut that would take him off his guard and give me a chance for a real punch.

Magee was cross-eyed. I didn't realize it at first, but it was about as disconcerting as anything could be, for I never knew whether or not his punches were going to land where he was looking. I stepped back for a swift lash. Blackeye closed in and caught me off my balance. He clipped me a bird on the chin and for a few moments birds sang all around me. But the round was over by then.

It was a terrible licking and I knew it. I had skill, but no practice and few tricks, and Magee had those as well as a lot of weight over me. It didn't seem to me, as I sat waiting for the call to the second round, that I could get the mauler in this fight. I had not estimated on so

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much speed and footwork from such a hulk as Magee, but I wanted to take it all so I could get on to his game and stage a come-back some day. Besides, the fighting fever was in me, whether I got the breaks or not.

He held me in every one of the six rounds, never once with a knockout punch but enough to make me feel so groggy that I couldn't give him what I wanted to. My anatomy was a target for him to practice hitting, my face a Rand-McNally for him to tear to pieces. As for my own feelings, my legs were like rubber under me, and, though I hooked and swung many times, there wasn't enough behind my knuckles to land so he'd remember it.

In the seventh, that woeful last, he tore in first and sprung a leak over my left eye. I couldn't see. With my defense gone, he went berserk. Slipping a lead to the right, he wedged his left foot next to mine and, while our bodies were all but locked, came through like lubricated lightning on my solar plexus; then—before the crowd knew what had happened—tore up like a flash and caught me on the button; but I had gone out like a light before that. It's an old trick a slugger plays when he's tired and wants to quit, and I

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suppose it's as square as anything in a racket like that.

Blackeye Magee went off with his gang in high spirits.

When I came to, Olsen and Jimmie and Fat were bending over me, while a half dozen others lingered in the background. The lamplight was still casting fitful shadows. I was sure of only three things: that the eye that was closed ached terribly, that my stomach was tortured beyond agony, but that the fever was in me and I'd get back at Blackeye before the harvest was over.

I could not work the next day, owing to split lips and body punishment, but from that time on old Pete Dunweely took me in hand. "I'll learn ye so ye'll hold that maunder fer a Garrison finish, come a month from now," he prophesied.

From then on I gave up playing around with the fellows I had been showing some fighting to ever since the row on the train. My tips weren't worth their time listening to. I knew I had to unlearn a lot of schoolboy stuff and get on to some good moves, and old Pete certainly was the one to show me. He talked such turkey to me the first couple of times that I often wondered why I took it, because I used to think I was a

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pretty fair boxer; but Dunweely wanted to make a fighter out of me. After sparring around with him and listening to his talk for a week or two, I knew he was right. Magee would always have it over me in size and strength, but Pete was teaching me that cunning and agility which would wear him out. We were on the track, and Black-eye Magee wasn't going to have a chance the next time he showed up.

CHAPTER FOUR

MORE stooking: how I hated the sight of the sheaves! The beauty of this golden ocean, which stretched as far as the horizons, brought only terror to my heart—for it was hard to think in terms of beauty when the uppermost thought in my mind was that before the golden grains could be turned into golden coins for the harvesters, weeks of blistering toil, aching feet and bleeding hands must be endured.

There were three demands made on a man during those weeks of diligent labor, and if he could not answer them it was doubtful whether his endurance would be enough to see him through. One was resourcefulness. In the little free time we had, it was necessary to be able to forget the work entirely. As soon as the boss yelled "All off!" a fellow had to be able to run and lose himself in a meal, or a concertina, or a cheap magazine, or just loaf so beautifully that the act became a pastime. If he didn't have some such resource, no matter how crude, to rely on, but

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staggered away from the field growling at himself and grumbling with fatigue, you knew he was doomed and that in a few days he'd take the easiest way out: sneak off from the ranch at night while everyone was asleep, hike to the nearest railroad and jump a rattler into some city. Fellows like that can't stand the open. When they've nothing to fall back on within themselves, then there's nothing there and they need the noise and commotion of a city to help them lose themselves and so hold their own.

Another demand made on a man was fortitude. We all knew when we got up in the morning that twelve or fourteen hours black with work was what we were getting up to. It took courage to face that, morning after morning, week after week; and not the kind of courage that dares anything because a medal or public recognition is its reward; but the courage that knows that its only compensation lies in its own active expression, and is willing to cease there, not staking the deed on any other reward than pride and satisfaction. This is not the bravery of heroes who are undaunted in the tide of battle, when flags wave and martial music echoes. It is the courage of men alone in the open, whose only banners

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are grit and pluck and whose music is the lone call of that solid resistant element in human nature that impels men to overcome the most difficult conditions and taste triumph. Through the fortitude that I witnessed and was a part of during those days and weeks of unrelenting toil, I learned that the estate of a man does not matter much, but that what does matter is the possession of an indomitable force *that will not let him be beaten*. And I learned, too, that reward is never to be found in material recompense, but in the discovery of a certain power within one's self.

I think the last demand was the hardest, though it was an external thing while the other two were inner mandates. The big essential up there was to front life with a smiling face. It said to the world that things were right with you even if they weren't. I found out that people respect a fellow infinitely more when he acts as if everything were O.K., even if his heart is aching and his body feels as if it couldn't last a minute longer. But it always *can* last, a spirit always *will* revive—so why not act as if it had never been downed? If a man couldn't laugh and swear and tell a couple of jokes that he wouldn't tell before ladies, he didn't have guts; that was all. And guts are

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to the man with a tough job before him what "It" is to the man with a girl to get: the thing that sees him through.

I think it is safe to say that I forgot then to *feel*, for the work was such that it robbed one of any physical sensibility. Not that it made a machine of a man; but it did teach him to get away from his body. When I thought of myself, I didn't think of my arms and legs as part of myself. They were the things that worked for me. For instance, when a man drives a car the gears and wheels and valves are what enable him to cover the ground, and they are things he is no part of. A laborer, facing almost superhuman toil, learns to look upon his muscle and sinew and heart as the man looks upon the parts of his car.

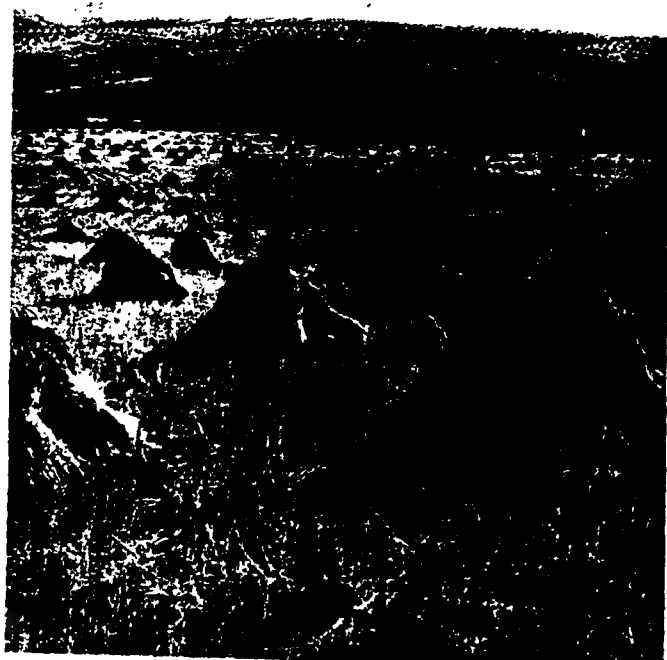
Our hard work, and the man's response to it, made me think of the way the Indians trained their bodies, harnessing them to their wills, never tolerating rebellion from any part of their physiques. Nerves were always to be held in check, never to be given free play. The Indians put themselves through such rigorous physical discipline that their bodies became as hard as steel, yet as resilient as the fine gut bows they used.

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They knew how to isolate the body from the self to such a point that the body could be completely ignored. An Indian never yielded to the temptation of scratching a mosquito bite, nor allowed himself to complain of the heat. He was above such. It was a fine test of stoicism when the mind, proved its ascendancy over the body; but the Indians learned that it *could* be done. And the harvesters had to incorporate it into their lives. There were some who didn't, of course, and they were the ones who brought tragedy into those terrible days. Plenty of poor devils, physically incapable, collapsed under the strain: bookkeepers and white-collar men who had come up from the cities, lured by the promise of generous pay; others in a last attempt to gain their health in the open; all, no matter what the end they were after, eager to wrest their share from the crop, but forced to give up. When the sun got a man in the field and he keeled over, Mack always ordered him home. He never gave any fellow a second chance, no matter how much it was begged for. Instead, he pointed to a little fenced-off plot back of the ranch house, where Mrs. Mack kept a garden. There were three or four curved mounds there with stones at each end, over men



Man's battleground against elemental foes.



Great fields stretching into the distance.

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who had not been able to get home before the last sleep overtook them.

I remember the first time I saw that tragic little spot. I thought it belonged to the Macks and that the only children they ever had lay there, like the farms in New England that have their burial plots on their own land. But Olsen told me that harvesters were resting there who had keeled over for good in the fields and who, true bums that they were, had no home to be sent to. It made me see more than ever that the harvest was a battle which must be fought and won, since it claimed its victims sometimes.

One by one the weaker had to give up the fight and go back to the cities. A tough body was what a man needed there; if he did not have it, then God pity him and let him go home. It reminded me of Robert Service's lines:

Send me the best of your breeding, lend me your chosen
ones;
Them will I take to my bosom, them will I call my sons;
Them will I gild with my treasure, them will I glut with
my meat;
But the others—the misfits, the failures—I trample them
under my feet.

The loss of Jimmie saddened me the most. I think he knew after he had been there a little

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while that the work was too much for him and that he could not hope to last through the season. He knew, but the rest of us didn't, for he went to work so willingly every morning, and every morning was so eager to entertain us with his sweet but plaintive voice. He would sing as long as anyone wanted him to. He didn't seem to care much about sleep the way the rest of us did. I learned later that his cough kept him awake so much of the night that he could hardly get any sleep anyway. Not one of us, not even Mack with his shrewd eyes, guessed that Jimmie was slowly buckling under.

Jimmie had a slight frame, and his cough never seemed to get any better, but his cheeks were always red and he went to work as gamely as the strongest of us. None of us knew, but Jimmie did. From the start it must have seemed hopeless to him, but he wouldn't go back for two reasons. When he returned to Toronto he was going to marry Daisy, but unless his body got husky up there he wouldn't go back at all, for he loved her too much to offer her an invalid for a husband. So I guess he decided after a while that the best thing to do was to compromise himself so that he couldn't ever go back. And the other

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reason was that he'd lost his job in Toronto and he knew it would not be easy for him to find another, and that if he could not return to Daisy with money from the harvest in his pockets he had better not return at all.

Day after day he realized that he would not be able to stand the work much longer, but he never complained to any of us. Instead he went on working and fighting, toiling against the inevitable with as cheerful a soul and brave a countenance as any young hero ever had. I think I learned my first lesson in unselfishness from Jimmie.

Then the end came.

We had been working along steadily under a mid-afternoon sun when Jimmie suddenly—without a word and with only a single sigh—keeled over. Alone and quietly, he went on his journey into the Great Beyond; but Daisy, the only person that in his short and lonely life he had found to love, was there to bid him farewell; for he had learned to find Daisy all about him in that desolate northern land, Daisy with her wheaten hair and her flower eyes.

I was working near him, and when he fell I ran to him and Olsen came up quickly behind me

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with a bucket of water. We rubbed it over Jimmie's cheeks that had suddenly lost all their high color; then Olsen put one of his great hands over Jimmie's eyes and the other over his heart, slowly shaking his head. I had never seen a man die before. A vain speechlessness welled up within me. I wanted to tell Olsen that we must do something to save our pal, but it was no use; I could not speak. Olsen jerked his head back toward the ranch house. I understood what he meant, so I picked up Jimmie. Olsen helped me place him across my shoulders; then I started, with one friend following and the other across my back. Olsen had taken off his wide-brimmed Stetson and was carrying it in his hands. It was a half a mile across the bare, stooked field to the ranch house, and during all that torturing journey Jimmie lay on my back as lifeless as a sack of meal, but as light as a sheaf of wheat. We laid him on the floor of the barn. It was cool there. Mack came up, but one look at Jimmie showed him the lad was past any aid. Olsen pulled off his shirt and covered Jimmie with it gently. Olsen was so big and Jimmie so slight that the shirt was almost long enough for a shroud.

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Olsen said, "Well, he's gone where he won't have to work no more."

Mack said, "Get back to your work, men. You can't let this interfere with the harvest."

I couldn't say anything.

Back to the harvest then. Life might appal us, Death might rob us—but the harvest must go on.

After supper that night we buried Jimmie in the little plot back of the ranch house. The Dane played somberly on his concertina. The harvesters stood around, hats off, heads bowed, as true and reverent and sad a little group as I have ever seen. No one would speak of Jimmie again, no one would act as if anything had happened—but there wasn't a man there that wouldn't miss him.

There wasn't anyone to write to but Daisy, so when Mack gave me Jimmie's pay check I slipped it into a letter and sent it on to her with a few words about how we'd all liked Jimmie. But it was hard to write to Daisy.

I once read in a book about Canada that "the country was not made by God for the effete, for the timorous, or for the laggard; but the strong and willing will find labor rewarded as in no other

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part of the world." Jimmie was willing, but he was not strong and he had fallen to the stern dictate of a pioneer land that calls for, and can use, only the ablest and toughest. Those of us who had not given up and whose bodies were able to stand the strain felt like conquerors—for were we not the victors over each succeeding day with its oppressive heat and toil?

At last, a short respite came: a rainy day! Thanksgiving pales into insignificance beside that day of rest. The men growled amiably when they woke up in the morning to the slow sloshing of rain against the sides of the bunkhouse; then they turned over for an extra hour's sleep. Harvesters growl at anything. It's part of their daily bread to act a little sour, for it never would do to let the rest of the gang think you were enjoying yourself—unless you were drunk. The bunkhouse leaked. There were several small pools of water down in the open floor space, and most of the men felt damp in their bunks, but—even with wet blankets and dripping roofs—it was a glorious thing for us to know that we could lie comfortably on our backs until seven or eight o'clock and then eat a leisurely meal. Some of us felt it was awful not to be earning any money at all during

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a long day, but the ease of our bodies alone soon dissipated such miserly thoughts, while the suggestion of a future spent in lazy luxury so gladdened our hearts that we hoped for innumerable rainy days.

After we had our breakfast—and, oh boy, but the hot Java tasted mighty good!—we trooped back to the bunkhouse and got the fire going in the stove. Then we all huddled around it and started swapping stories. It doesn't take a bunch like that long before their stories reach the point where no one could possibly believe them, so when the human got too near the mythical we stopped and looked about for something else to do. One of the Canucks dug under the blankets in his bunk and brought out a shabby magazine filled with improbable Western stories; then Fat produced a tattered and dog-eared penny dreadful—some of Nick Carter's exploits. We needed a volunteer to read aloud, and as I seemed to be the only one who could read well enough to be understood, they elected me to entertain them. It first occurred to me then, in that dingy Northern bunkhouse among that strange crew of illiterate men, that the advantages of education were many.

We huddled closer to the stove while I read

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them blood-curdling tales of cow-punchers. Occasionally I would pause for breath and look up to see if my readers were still interested. The bunkhouse was deathly quiet, the stillness broken only by frequent puttoos and then a s-s-s as a well-aimed squirt of tobacco juice hit the stove; while the men were so absorbed in the story that they sat chewing their cud in an agitated fashion or just staring at me with wide-open mouths. So the first day passed of what looked to be a steady rain.

On the second day we decided to hitch up a wagon and go into town. Walking the twelve miles was unthinkable because of the mud, but with a wagon and a four-horse team we stood some chance of getting through. Let me explain here that there are no roads in the Northwest, but only meager trails cut by wagons. Traversing a muddy road that is bordered by soft silt, due to the rain, one can only hope against meeting a wagon coming the opposite way. We started out right after breakfast in the pouring rain with the team plowing slowly along, and fortunately did not pass another vehicle all the long road into Sintaluta. The natives know better than to go out in weather like that, for up North when it

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once gets started raining there's no telling how long it may keep up. By the time we reached town the horses were well played out from the heavy going, and we were cold, wet and miserable. We pulled up in the wagon before the pool-room and the men made a dash inside to get warm and dry, tuck some grub away and wash it down with a more agreeable liquid than Java.

But I didn't care about getting dry. I figured I could do that any day, for what I most wanted then was to find someone who had a cow pony for sale. After looking around the town a while and making several inquiries, I got a line on a man a couple of miles outside of Sintaluta. So I dragged my old hat down over my ears and tied my scarf tighter about my throat and started down the road to Traverse Jones'.

I tramped through the rain, getting muddier and more dilapidated looking every minute, but my spirit was so gay that it quenched the rain with its own buoyancy; for my heart had been set on having a pony ever since I had come North and seen those great prairie wastes that would be so fine to ride over, and now I knew I was going to have one.

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When I reached Traverse Jones' place I was welcomed with a pleasant Western hospitality. Going around to the kitchen, I'd scarcely lifted up my hand to knock when Jones opened the door. They didn't have to ask me who I was or what I wanted, the way we do in the East; it was enough for Jones and his wife to see that I was wet and cold and by the looks of my boots had been tramping a long way.

Jones said, "How'do, stranger! Powerful bad day to be out in. Set down and warm yourself."

I obeyed willingly because I was tired and cold by then and the pleasant smell of food lingering through the kitchen made me almost faint with hunger. I had not eaten since early morning and it was mid-afternoon. I suppose a boy's eyes always look hungry, for I hadn't any more than sat down before Traverse called to his wife and said, "Bring the lad some'at to eat, Bessie, he's purty near played out."

So Bessie came after a few moments with a plateful of good things and a bowl of thick, hot soup; and with it she brought that keen joy the Westerners feel in offering hospitality which makes it such a pleasure to receive.

The Northwestern farmers are almost always

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married. There isn't much point in a man's starting to homestead without a wife. And, whether it's the fine climate or the fact that the crops are usually prosperous, the women manage to stay singularly beautiful with a lot of charm about them. Bessie and Traverse Jones embodied to me the typical Western couple in the typical Western farmhouse. They probably didn't ask a great deal of life, but they looked as if they got what they asked for. Men who work with the soil learn to adapt their demands to their abilities. They aim at a certain mark and, because the target is not too far out of reach, the arrow usually goes home. Bessie and Traverse, middle-aged, well fed, with kind hearts and an air of satisfactory contentment about them, looked as if life were a pretty sunny proposition, as they sat smiling in their warm and roomy kitchen.

I ate and warmed up, then told my host what I had come for.

"Wal, I got three ponies, but I ain't a-goin' to part with any on 'em."

Such stubbornness from such a hospitable man surprised me. I tried to reason with him.

"They ain't never been rid," he argued, as if that would keep me from my desire.

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"That's fine," I said. "I want to have a pony I can break myself."

Bessie was on my side too. "Let the lad have one, Traverse. Can't ye see his heart is set on it?"

But Traverse only shook his head.

I decided that having come almost fifteen miles on a dismal day, for a whim, and with that distance to cover again before dark, I could not afford to let my whim die too easily. So we went on. Jones bluffed and I bargained and Bessie smiled 'as if she knew all along what the outcome would be.

Suddenly Traverse said, "I'll let ye have yer pick fer fifteen dollars." He blurted it out with the air of a dealer announcing such an exorbitant price that his client would be stunned into silence.

"Done," I cried, and laid the money on the table to prove it.

Traverse led the way out to the barn and through it into the corral. There were three ponies there, and I knew mine instantly—a little strawberry roan with streaked silver mane and tail.

Traverse gave me an old bridle, but it took some time before I could slip it over the pony's head. No one uses a saddle out there. In fact

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a "bronc" is considered well equipped if he has a blanket. I circled around him and talked horse to him as persuasively as I knew how. In about an hour he was mine. I spread my coat on his back for a blanket, jumped on and, waving good-bye to Traverse and his wife Bessie, sped down the road.

I felt very proud of that pony and it was great fun to ride him back to the ranch that night instead of lumbering along in the wagon. Needless to say, I got back hours ahead of any of the other men.

One of the suggested origins of the word Canada is the Algonquin "*cantata*," meaning "welcome." For when the Indians first saw Cartier they are said to have greeted him with joy, crying "*Cantata, cantata!*" After my pleasant experience with Bessie and Traverse Jones, I like to think of that derivation as the true one, since from first to last Canada held out welcoming arms to me.

The rain had not ceased by the third day, so I decided to ride ~~into~~ town again on my purchase. He actually ran that twelve miles through the mud and all without breaking his stride once. "Speed" seemed the most appropriate name to

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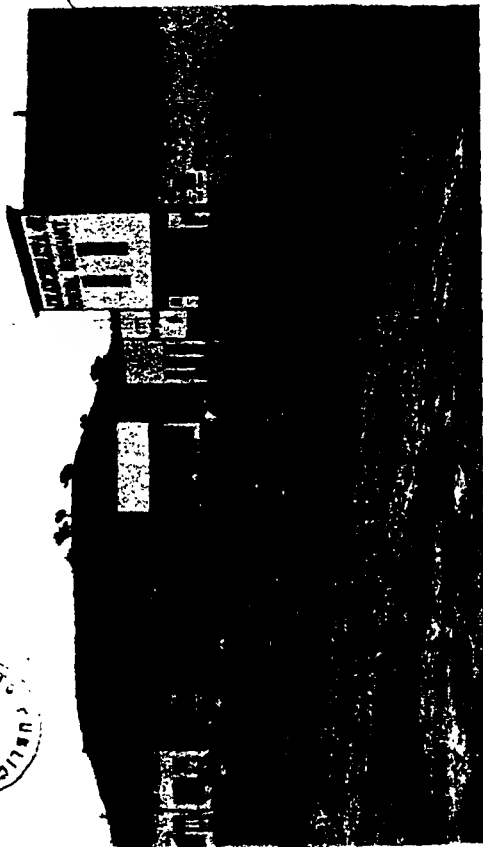
call him, so I wasted no time in christening him, with the dismal Northern rain for his baptismal water. He was pretty for a bronc, and clever, could stop and wheel instantly from a lope, and cover almost any distance in a remarkably short time. He was sensitive to word and touch and, even though he had never been ridden before (according to Traverse Jones), proved remarkably easy to handle.

Owing to the nutritious fodder and abundance of pure water, the horses raised in the West far excel all others in health and strength. They have lung power, cleaner bones, and endurance far above the Eastern horse. Also, they are quite immune from hereditary complaints. In the Northwest there is a peculiar absence of pests of every kind. The vegetation is free from bugs, the animals from disease; for the Northwest is a new land that has not yet been cluttered with false ideas, and all forms of life profit by it.

We arrived in Sintaluta in jig time, and Speed had a good coat of lather; nevertheless, I tied him to the hitching post in the rain. This may seem unwise treatment for a horse, but Western ponies are so strong and hardy that they can stand any work or climate. A saddle horse of



The marvelous alchemy of grain filled me with awe.



The Northwesterly town is just one wide, dirty street.

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the East could never live, under the treatment given these beasts of the prairies.

I looked like a member of the House of David, my hair had grown so long; so I decided to go up to the pool-room and get a haircut. But when the tonsorial artist finished wrestling with my head I looked like the burnt side of a steer. The men playing at the tables around the room invited me to join in a game of snooker and I acquiesced when I knew that the stakes were to be low. However, this was my first try at snooker so I didn't come out a winner until after the fifth game. After a while we got tired of snooker and decided to buy a case of Calgary beer. It was the novel experience of my young life to be on a drinking party with a bunch of seasoned drinkers, and I was feeling pretty proud of myself and well set up. Everything went wonderfully until the sixth bottle, which I had the wits to make a stirrup-cup; then my head began to swell and I made for the open air or I would have been on the floor.

I said to myself, "That's the last drinking party you ever get roped in on," and rode back to the ranch feeling very sick and foolish.

CHAPTER FIVE

SIX weeks had gone by and Mack's rolling acres were all cut and stooked. The fields that had waved their golden banners of grain were now dotted with neat shocks. It was a thrilling thing then to climb up to the top of the windmill back of the ranch house and get a bird's-eye view of that vast land. Somehow it seemed so much vaster than ever before! After cutting, the country had a bare, sunburnt look, and stretched away indefinitely with its depths and hollows and great, flat wastes of prairie; and beyond all that, interminable reaches of sky. It was hard to believe there could be so much sky. Beneath the clipped stubble the stoneless soil lay resting, gathering new force from the winds and the rains, transforming itself from effete dust into rich, black loam ready for the spring harrowing.

After the stooking was done, we had a few days of loafing before the wheat was ready to be threshed. The threshing machines are operated by contractors who go from farm to farm. When

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the big machine was hauled on to Mack's ranch, we spent almost a day tinkering with it: oiling the pulleys and greasing the cups, minutely inspecting each movable part. As it stood in the sunlight, bulky and inert, it reminded me somehow of the great horse the Spartans built in order to capture Troy. For men were crawling all over it, in and out, up and down—tuning up the blower, the feeder, the engine—grooming it for the fray. Throughout six long weeks, we had worked for the wheat; now this machine was to work for us. We had already been conquerors once; and now if our "Trojan horse" went along without balking we would be conquerors again, over the all-too-short time that we still had before bad weather might set in.

One evening I was hanging around the thresher, talking to the fireman. Mack came up and said:

"Let's take a look at the wheat, lad, to see if it's ready."

I walked out into the fields with him. When we got up to a shock, Mack pulled off a handful of grain from the stalk and felt it to see whether it had dried out; then he bit it to see whether it had hardened.

"It's O.K.," he said, "and it's better to thresh

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now while the weather is good than to have the grain stand in the stalks all winter. Now it is dry enough so it will not mold in the granaries."

For Mack knew, with the nose for prediction Western ranchers have, that the good weather would not hold out much longer.

The farmers, for all their slipshod ways, can foretell the weather as much as a week in advance with as much accuracy as any government meteorologist. Mack explained to me that the weather was largely dependent on conditions that could be determined by watching their effect on the moon. If the moon changed at night, conditions promised good weather; if in the daytime it meant that things would be unsettled. A bright circle around the sun makes the farmer prepare for the worst, for it unfailingly means a storm. The winds are also good forecasters. A north wind brings clear weather; southeast means rain or snow; while the west is "that good West Wind that never blows any harm." The "chinook"—the warm, southwesterly breeze that comes across the Japanese Current in the Pacific and through the passes in the Rockies—used to be called by the Indians "the scatterer of the snows," for it promised many days of temperate weather; it is

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this chinook wind that tempers the Canadian climate.

The government meteorological station nearest to where I was is at Swift Current, 2,392 feet above sea level. It gives the farmers warning of storms, and of hot or cold waves. But a ranchman's own nose for that sort of thing is equal any day to a weather bureau's report. The prairie provinces are noted for their extremes of temperature, but the air is of such a pure, dry quality that it tempers the extremes of frost or heat, preventing any dreadful cold or exhausting humidity. The average for sunshine through this section of the country is nine hours a day; fourteen during the summer months. The long hours of daylight during the growing season, and the short, cool nights, combined with the fertility of the soil, act upon the wheat so that it matures better and has no equal for milling purposes. This wheat is famous the world over as "No. 1 Spring" or "Manitoba Hard."

Two kinds of wheat are grown in the prairie provinces: red fife and marquis. Red fife is the older, and marquis is a combination of red fife and Indian grain. The quality of wheat raised in Canada is in every way equal to its tremendous

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quantity. It is famous for its high gluten content, which, when the grain is milled, produces a larger loaf of bread. The Dominion is the second greatest wheat-raising country, the United States being first; but owing to Canada's climate, the fertility of its soil, and easy tillage, the Dominion grows the finest grade of milling wheat in the world. And finally, Canada's proudest boast is that her wheat yield per acre exceeds that of any other country and that she leads the world in wheat exporting.

The risks attendant on this great industry are many. Wheat must not be allowed to get tough, in the first place. Then, if it gets damp or wet, it may turn musty. Finally, if it remains too long in the granaries it is likely to become binburnt. All those dangers the farmer must guard against. It is no wonder that Canadian ranchers have shrewd intelligence and quick judgment, since a whole year's crop and thousands of dollars often depend upon a single decision.

Just as experience teaches the rancher to read secrets from the moon and the winds, it teaches him how to gauge the yield of an acre. Mack had only to feel the grain and look at the height of a stalk to be able to estimate almost exactly

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the number of bushels one of his acres would yield.

The worst storms the farmers know are the hail storms, when stones fall that are as large as marbles. The violence and force with which they descend often kill or mangle horses and cattle in the fields, and thresh down the grain so that it is useless. The sound of the approaching storm can be compared only to the thunder machines used backstage, and the sight of it to a wall of white advancing across the prairie. If men are caught in the fields during one of these storms, they get under the wagons or run to cover in the nearest coulee—any place that might mean shelter; for the hailstones have been known to tear men's skin so they are past recognition, and even sometimes to kill them. Every farmer is covered by hail insurance. If a man is so foolish or so new at the game as to think he can get by without carrying a policy against these storms, usually a single season is enough to show him his folly. The hail storms are purely local, sometimes confined to a very small area; but they cut wide swathes of destruction.

I saw only one. It was at the end of the season and the wheat was safely in. We were all under

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cover in the bunkhouse. No animals were loose in the fields. There was nothing to fear, or fear for. But I shall never forget my terror at the sudden hiss of the storm as it broke against our walls, and at the deafening din that filled the next five minutes. It sounded like a bombardment of boulders. I marveled that the sides of the bunkhouse could withstand such vehemence, while stones clattered and wind shrieked. Then, as suddenly as it came, it was gone; but the silence of the next few moments was equally dreadful.

We had been having good weather and the signs seemed to indicate that we would continue to have it; so the next morning we began to thresh. When I first approached that great monster of a machine it was in the dim half-light of early dawn. I was standing around with a bunch of other men waiting for orders, and I felt as; I suppose, the galley slaves on the ancient Roman triremes must have felt, watching their commanders make preparations for a battle in which they would be compelled to take a part.

As the sun rose we began to work, and it was during those weeks of threshing that we found out (in case we had not already) just what work really was. For our day began at four A.M. and

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we did not quit until nine P.M. We had two extra lunches inserted into the day's schedule, making five times out for grub in all, but as each meal consisted of the same ingredients as every other meal, there was no difference between breakfast, mid-morning lunch, lunch, tea, and dinner. Canada has a right to be proud of the men of iron discrimination who have made this section the greatest bread-yielding center of the world.

My first job on the threshing shift was as a teamster; and harnessing a pair of broncs in the chilly dark of an early morning proved the most difficult task I had met in the North. But Olsen helped me out. He got up twenty minutes before the other men did and followed me out to the barn; then with a "Hi, lad, this way," and "Ho, lad, that-a-way," we got the heavy collars and harnesses over the fidgety horses and backed them up to the whiffletrees. His coaching was excellent. In a little while I could make short work of fitting the horses out myself. I never asked Olsen to help me, nor did he offer to; he just came along and saw that I got things all right. I used to wonder what I would ever have done in the North if Olsen had not been there with his helpful "Hi, lad!"

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There were five other men driving teams. Each of us in turn got alongside the stock-loader. This throws the bundles into the wagons. It resembles the hay-loader so common in the East and is an entirely separate machine, pulled by six horses. It is quite a ticklish job to get the shocks loaded into the wagons, because the wagon-driver must keep his horses directly parallel with the horses of the loader, and must not under any circumstances deviate from his course.

When the wagons were filled to capacity, we took the loads to the thresher and threw them into the feeder as quickly as possible. As the grain is threshed into the separator it flows into the granaries, while the straw is tossed on to the ground and pitched into a stack. The granaries, which are beside the thresher, hold each about twelve hundred bushels, and it used to take us from four to six hours to fill one of them. Then we would move on to another granary and go through the process over again.

As the days went on, the men fell into their jobs better and the whole outfit speeded up. It was tiring work for me at first; the horses I was driving were high-strung and kept me in a panic wondering whether I could make each successive

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trip from loader to thresher safely. I did, and after a while the broncs quieted. Ten and fourteen hours a day of hard pulling will take the spirit out of any animal in time, and my team soon walked as docilely as a pair of worn-out truck horses. I don't know why, but I seemed to be obsessed by the fear that if I didn't get my load in on time I would be fired. It made me miserable until I hammered some sense into my head with the reflection that I was doing the best I knew how, and that was all anyone could hope to do. Take it or leave it. Then I began to go at things more easily and get real joy out of a job well done. I think a man has made a great step forward when he learns how to *compliment himself* on doing something well, for he knows better than anyone else whether it's up to the cream of his ability or not, and it's a silly sort of modesty if he waits for someone else to tell him so. It's a good idea always to get there first—even in opinions of yourself.

I had heard rumors before the threshing started that the boss wanted to thresh at night when the moon was full. I knew we were pressed for time, as we had begun late in the season, and that every available moment must count, but I

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could not believe that even the light of the moon would be turned into an excuse for greater production.

After threshing all day Tuesday, Mack got us together as soon as we had finished supper and asked us if we would work that night. He appealed to each man confidentially, as if the entire harvest depended exclusively on his coöperation. He said that ordinarily he would not think of asking us to do this, but that he was afraid he would not get his crop in before the bad weather came. Out in the West, the ranchers have a way of lowering their voices when they speak of the "bad weather," as if mere mention of it might bring it. It seemed to me more or less in the nature of a lark to use the moon as a substitute for daylight, but I kept that to myself; while the other men grumbled and swore at Mack for asking them to work overtime, and then finally consented.

We went out after supper to the machine. The prairie—our Armageddon of the daytime—glowed incandescently, for the white moon had suddenly transformed that place of forced labor into a fantastic playground. The thresher, surrounded by the stocks, loomed in the distance like

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some dread monster of mythical lore, stolidly waiting to satisfy its hunger. It brought to my mind fairy tales of fire-spitting dragons impatient for a human meal.

It did not take long to get steam up and swing the outfit into motion once more. The work went along rapidly. The moonlight, the phantom stocks waiting to be devoured, and the whole grotesque scene seemed to inspire the men with vigor, for they worked with as much energy as they had during the first morning shift. The slight danger that lies in threshing at night is in getting too close to the machine and slipping into the roaring feeder. We worked until the moon went down, shortly after midnight. Then all hands were ordered to bed and we made short work of falling into a sound sleep, since the next day's work must begin at four A.M. just the same.

The following morning I was bringing my load up to the thresher when Mack called to me and said:

"Hey, lad, come here. Will you fire a while for me? My fireman quit last night and I've got to have a man."

I said, "How much more do I get for doing it?"

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"Eight dollars, lad."

So I took the job that day, but I understood long before the blessed darkness relieved me why the fireman had quit! That was probably (I hope so anyway) the hardest day's manual labor I shall ever do in my life. From dawn to dark I had to keep the firebox loaded with straw. There was not a chance to look up for a minute; it was just a steady shoveling all day long. After it was over my body felt like a shell. It took me five minutes to get my back straight enough so I could stand up, while my hands were almost welded on to the fork handle.

Saturday came, as sunshine comes after rain—the favorite of all days. We quit sharp at six, making it seem like a half day after we had worked so late during the week. No matter how the weather looked or what the demands of the crop were, that was the law in the West: quit at six Saturday night, get into town as quickly as possible, then loaf on Sunday. During the months I was in the Northwest I never saw any rancher infringe either of those laws, or any reluctance on the part of the men to take advantage of them. How we all looked ahead to that night!

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It was much more of a treat to my mind to get into town, drink beer, and play snooker than it ever was to go to the best musical show on a Saturday night in New York.

Sunday was spent just lazing around the bunk-house or playing snooker, depending upon the condition in which you had come back from Sinaluta. Or, if you were a natural-born hunter and had a gun, Sunday was the best day to use it. I am no kind of a shot, but several times I went out and idled away at flocks of ducks. They were mostly brilliant pin-tails and shovelers, and as they are very thick in the West during the harvest, it didn't need much marksmanship to bring back the spoils. And you can take my word for it, it was a dandy thing to have duck for dinner after the weeks and weeks of range beef.

Often on Sunday when the sun was warm and the air cool, I would go out on Speed for the whole day. We covered many miles between sun-up and sun-down, and I saw much of the North that way: the North that spread from level plains, vast and treeless, to breathless mountain scenery; the North that was sparsely wooded with willow brush and poplar; the North that rivers had

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enriched so much by irrigating the soil; the North that was a land of such infinite promise and immediate delight.

One day we had ridden west straight as a die almost all day long. It was nearing sunset time when we reached a tiny mesa in the hills, higher than I had ever been before. I slid off Speed and dropped the reins over his neck, so he could graze at will; then I just lay back on the earth, which can seem so soft and welcome when a fellow loves it. All around us there were billowy banks of cloud, and I felt as if I were lying on a mountain plateau rimmed in by serried peaks. I half imagined that there were glaciers near me, dazzling in the sun. I seemed to hear the crash of a river that split through the timbered valley below us—an impetuous streak of white-foamed water. I might have been high up in the Rockies instead of on a little plain in the low hills of Saskatchewan, for I got the same thrill—and it made me think that where you are certainly doesn't matter much, but what you go into it with does.

By then, I was feeling hungry, so I scurried up a little fire and put my old fry-pan and coffee-pot over it. When Speed and I went off like that for the day, my kit and a few supplies always went

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along too; for towns are far apart in the Northwest and a boy gets hungry. Pretty soon the air was fragrant with coffee boiling and bacon frying. Beyond that, there wasn't another sound except Speed as he munched and nibbled and poked around for tender bits of grass, and the distant little waterfall that I had imagined to be a rushing river. Once or twice, I was almost sure that I heard the night call of the ptarmigan, and I thought I saw one scuttling through the brush, distinct for a moment in plumage that was turning white as winter neared.

When the sun began to set, the low clouds took on so much color that it was as if a rainbow had fallen down and were breaking all over us. The world seemed drowned in a sunset haze. Vivid greens and tanager reds, browns and brilliant blues, all turned the drab prairie landscape into a changing prism. I had seen the Aurora Borealis once up North, and it struck me then that the sunset had brought it all back again. For a few moments there was nothing to do but sense color and listen to wind moving in the brush. I was *living* then!

After a while, Speed nudged over to me and thrust his soft nose into my hand. A bronc is

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usually sensitive about things like that, so I knew it was time to be getting under way. When I hopped on Speed and said good-bye to our little mesa, still shining through a colored haze, I was glad that there were many Sundays ahead which I could spend as I had this day. Just being outdoors like that, alone with a friendly pony, strikes something way down deep inside, and real; but I wished I had a dog.

Speed swung into a long-strided lope, the pace he set himself and could keep for hours. It was turning dark so I let the reins lie on his neck, for a bronc knows his way home, always. We had gone about half the distance to the ranch when, approaching a small brush clump, Speed suddenly stopped. It surprised me for a second, but I was to be more surprised as my level-headed pony started acting foolisher every minute. He danced and dodged about the little clump, halting to put his head up in the air and snort and paw the ground with a fretful forefoot. Nothing could induce him to go past the brush. He was acting so queerly that I half expected a cougar or a lion to jump out at us and rip us to pieces. Then I realized that it was something far more subtle than a wild beast. For horses have courage like

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men. They can face anything real, the way a man can; but something suggestive of evil and bristling with cunning, something that cannot quite be seen or defined, throws them into spasms of terror.

Something told me it was a snake. Then I understood Speed's fright. A pony is such a frank and honest creature that its opposite, a slimy, crawling snake, produces a terrorizing effect. I was not sure what we could do about it. I had no weapons but my small bowie knife, and I knew that I was not a good enough shot to hit the snake if he were to come out of the brush and I were to hurl it at him. But somehow, we had to get that snake.

I backed Speed slowly and talked horse to him, hoping to calm him. He was tense in every muscle and quivering like grass when the wind crosses it. Then I unbuckled and pulled off my belt, letting it fall on to the ground near the brush with the buckle in my hand. I moved it cautiously. We would tease the snake out of his lair and then try our luck at murder. After a minute or two, there was a slight rustling. I could see two small eyes glaring through the fast-deepening dark. For some reason, the sight filled me with a speechless horror. Speed saw, too. He trembled like

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a bolt of lightning chained and seeking escape. I pulled on his reins until he went back on his haunches. The snake grew bold and emerged. There seemed to be no end to him as he came across the space between the brush clump and us. I thought that a long black hose with green eyes in it was wriggling toward us. He was so long and fat and evil-looking that it did not seem he could be a snake. (I had never seen anything but baby garters and water moccasins before.)

Transfixed with terror, I was still able to draw the end of my belt across the ground until it was almost on a line with Speed's forefeet. Old Man Rattler came along, too. The belt stopped. I started sliding it through my fingers to get a better hold for what I wanted to do with it, but I wasn't a second too soon. As I raised my slim weapon, the snake raised himself from the ground. He lurched back, spit out with his venomous tongue and, though he was not large, I feared for a dreadful moment that he was on the point of lunging forward to coil himself around Speed's ankles. Then I threw the belt with all the force of my right arm. The buckle struck him clean, and whacked his head right off. . . . If it had been daylight, I think I would have tried to bring

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him back to the ranch with me but, even though dead, he still looked ugly and terrifying and I was glad to leave him lying there.

So, once again, Speed swung into the easy lope that he was scarcely to break for an hour or more. It was dark and the stars were high. As we raced along, with the prairie wind in our faces and the hard ground flying under Speed's fleet hoofs, Laurence Hope's words sang through me like the song of my inmost heart:

These are my people, and this my land;
I hear the pulse of her secret soul.
This is the life that I understand,
Savage and simple, and sane and whole.

CHAPTER SIX

EVEN though I had earned a few dollars a day more at firing, I soon decided that I'd rather forfeit that than work every day till I dropped. So I went back to driving a team again: a job that I rather enjoyed, once I knew the ropes.

One morning when I went out to get my first load, I came along beside a coulee. A coulee is a tiny ravine ~~matted~~ with underbrush and filled with scrub poplar and ~~birch~~ thickets; when the saskatoons are ripe, it yields them abundantly. Coulees are famous hiding-places for wolves, coyotes and any of the prairie animals. So, when I heard a low moaning, I thought of a coyote in a trap and, leaving the team, ran down into the ravine. I could not locate the sound for a long time because it seemed to grow fainter every moment, and the light breeze bandied the pitiful wailing around in all directions. Finally, I discovered the brush clump where the noise came from, and there I found a dog, caught in a wolf-

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trap by one crushed paw. He was thin and starved and had gnawed the ankle of the prisoned foot to the bone in a vain endeavor to free himself.

I went toward him quickly. It is always dreadful to see an animal suffering, but to see one that has been in agony for a week or more is as near to heartbreak as I ever want to come. When I got close to him, he struggled to his feet and snarled at me. I put out my hand to quiet him, but his lips went up as much as to say that his fangs were still good. Poor fellow, he was crazed with pain and half mad with hunger, and evidently thought I had come to torment him further. I suppose torture had closed down upon his world so that it had long ago obscured any hope of relief, and the feeble impetus remaining in his dog soul was directed to revenge.

I spoke to him softly. I coaxed and wheedled him. I bribed him with promises, hoping that some tone in my voice would release his memory and make him recall that men were kind and did not set traps to catch dogs, who were their friends. But his lips remained curled. His hackle stood up. A low, throaty growl issued continually from his mouth, while his eyes had the de-

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mented look of a tame thing gone wild and reverting to ancient instincts.

It was hopeless to attempt to win him with words. I knew that he must be saved soon, and that drastic measures were needed; so I picked up a small stone and aimed it at his head, trusting that it would not kill him. With a sharp note of menace, part growl, part groan, he sank down upon the ground. I went up to him and pried his mangled foot loose from the trap, then I picked up the great, limp body in my arms and carried it to the wagon. There was some straw in the bottom on which I laid the poor devil; then, jumping in myself, I cracked the reins across the ponies' backs and went rattling over the prairie. The load was so light compared with the ones the broncs usually drew, and the morning air so keen, that they galloped swiftly, and the lumbering old wagon spun along behind on two wheels most of the time. I got quite a kick out of it and have envied ambulance-drivers ever since. All thought of a load other than my patient was forgotten. If the boss didn't like my making the trip empty I didn't care, for I knew the dog would die if he did not have food and attention immediately.

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When I reached the outfit loading their wagons, I yelled for Olsen to come along with me. He tossed away his pitchfork as carelessly as a matchstick and came at a run, saying, "I don't know what's up or where yer goin', youngster, but I'm with you!" He climbed into the wagon, and one look at the dog was enough; then he was down on the floor beside him with the relaxed brown head in his lap, rubbing it slowly, seeking to call back the life my stone had driven out temporarily.

Mack came up before we got under way again, to see what the excitement was about. All he saw was great big Olsen on the bottom of the wagon looking pretty foolish, I guess, with a dog's head in his lap. But that was plenty. Animals take first place in the true rancher's heart, and a sick or injured animal gets all the care and tenderness given to a man.

"Hurry up, lad! Take that critter back to the ranch house and look after him. He's in bad shape and he's worth money up here. Never mind your loads this morning," Mack said, and I was struck by his earnest tone.

Reins barely tickling the broncs' backs were all that was needed to set them into a gallop to the bunkhouse; there, Olsen and I carried the dog in

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and laid him on my bunk. Olsen insisted on forcing some whisky down his throat, while I went over to the ranch house for some beef and soup. My friend must have used a charm or something, for by the time I got back to the bunkhouse the dog had opened his eyes, and his white-tipped tail showed his change of attitude as he wagged it very slowly, very feebly. He was badly off. The foot was mangled terribly, and the probable week of starvation he had endured had reduced him to weakness. But Olsen assured me that he would come out of it all right. We fed him, dressed his paw and finally left him in an exhausted sleep.

I thought of nothing else that day but my new-found pet, and couldn't get back soon enough that night when work was over. When I went over to my bunk the dog lifted his fangs at me—but this time to grin gratefully. My heart was thumping pretty hard then with thankfulness, and life looked to me as if it couldn't hold much more. I don't wonder they say a boy isn't complete without a dog. There's something in each nature that cries for the other, and they feel slick when they get together.

Dogs pick up quickly, and in a few days he was limping around and wagging his long tail,



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always at my heels. I think it is safe to say that from then on he never left me once, and I know now that only death can part us.

He proved to be the kind of dog called in the North a Saskatchewan Greyhound, which means that he is a cross between a great Dane and a greyhound. It seems to me to be a wonderful breed, combining the vigor and strength of the one with the agility and speed of the other. He is larger than a collie, with short, brindled hair that is sleek and smooth; beautifully marked with a white vest, white paws, and white tip to his tail. He stands within an inch as high as I do when he puts his forepaws on my shoulders, and when his great tail wags and thumps it is enough to knock over anything within its reach. He has a fine head, with small ears that flatten back when he runs, and a long slender nose. I think that his eyes are the kindest and most understanding I have ever seen, animal or human. They are a soft, liquid brown and speak eloquently. His body is one long lithe streak and his stride as swift as it is sure. I called him Ronno.

Of course, you have all read descriptions of the coyotes yowling on the prairies. I shall not attempt to describe that dread sound. I doubt if

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anyone could, for only hearing it can make one realize how awesome it is. It utterly froze me at first, and even when nightly repetition made it a familiar noise, the lonely howling never failed to make my heart jump and send chills up and down my spine. I think a punishment more horrible than any prison would be to isolate a man on a prairie for one night with nothing but that dreadful cry around him. I had often read of "blood running cold" in people's veins, and doubted it; but during the long fall nights up North I had exactly that sensation too often to doubt any longer.

The prairie is well populated with coyotes. Even in the daytime they can be seen slinking from coulee to coulee. The pelts are worth about twenty-five dollars each, but even a good marksman has difficulty hitting the little animals, as they are so swift and tricky. That is where a dog comes in. He can be trained to run the coyotes down and kill them. The job is done quickly by slashing the throat, and thus the pelt is not harmed. Domestication has not robbed the dog of his ability to outrun a coyote, whereas it has taught him not to eat what he must only kill. A well-trained prairie dog will never devour



Ronno.



Bob Yates ready for a fight.

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a beast he has tracked out and pursued, until his master gives him leave to.

Dogs are indispensable to the prairie huntsman, since most of the prairie animals are of such shades of brown that they harmonize with the drab surroundings and freeze themselves into any background so that the human eye will not detect them. But a dog can always scent them out and will give them such a run over an open space that he will either overtake them or his master will gain time and vision to aim and fire. Needless to say, the farmers up there are excellent marksmen. I don't believe I have ever seen a natural-born Western rancher use more than one shot to bring in a desired quarry. When I say "natural-born" I do not necessarily mean *born* up North; I mean a man so constituted that the wild comes naturally to him.

Another advantage in having a dog in a place as waste and devoid of landmarks as the prairie is that a dog—like a deer or any other moist-nosed animal—scents the wind in his nostrils enough to get the points of the compass. I used to go for long tramps over the prairie when I had Ronno, and often found myself puzzled as to direction, bewildered because every thicket and

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stone was so similar to every other thicket and stone. Then I would call on Ronno. He sensed the situation, as dogs will when they are left alone. Sitting back on his haunches, he would put his long nose up into the air, sniffing slowly, carefully comparing each scent he got with some other that he had received long ago and that had been stored back in his memory for just such an occasion. Slowly his nose would point North, East, South, West. Sometimes the scents were confusing and it took him a long time, but when he had finally solved the riddle of the compass his nose, like the magnetic needle, would point—not North—but home. He would come to me then, wagging his tail, his blessed old snout aligned with the way we must go. It was always the shortest and most direct route, too.

Let me say here that we never discovered Ronno's master. In a short time everyone within a hundred-mile radius knew that a harvester on Mack's ranch had a stray dog and wanted to find its owner. News like that travels quickly from mouth to mouth, for men know up there what it is to lose a dog; but no one came to claim Ronno. I tried to curb my affection for him so that the possible blow of losing him would not be too great,

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but it was not necessary. After a while, Mack and I came to the conclusion that Ronno's master had probably been a lone lumberman far up in the North who had died, for Ronno was so faithful that only death could make him desert a post. When his watch over the master who did not waken proved futile, he had undoubtedly gone in search of food or help and in his wandering been caught in the trap. His frame had most certainly been emaciated with hunger long before he was caught in the trap, for, as I have said, he was badly off. So I assumed that Ronno was my own after waiting fruitlessly, hoping in my heart for my own sake that none would come to claim him. Ronno must have known from the first that his former master would not come, for he attached himself to me so devotedly.

Well, to get back to the coyotes. Ronno was a killer born and bred. His first master, whoever he had been, had trained him, as all Western ranchers do, to run a coyote to the death, rip his throat and then wait for his master to come up and skin the little prairie beast. After that he was given the carcass to feast on. This was his one means of obtaining food. He knew no other. Ronno was thrifty, as dogs are, and would bury

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what he could not eat, to go back to on another day when he was hungry and there was no hunting in the offing. Sometimes the men tried to feed Ronno with scraps of their own beef, but he scorned such emasculate offerings.

The first time I ever saw Ronno kill was about a month after I had brought him in. His leg had healed beautifully and there were only a few scars which would be covered when the hair grew in. He was in fine form; eager, interested, famished for some raw prairie meat after his enforced bunkhouse diet. It was on a Sunday and I had gone out for a ride on Speed, with Ronno following close behind. We were running across a field from which the wheat had been drawn. I had let Speed's reins lie loose on his neck, a hint that he always took, and would run like a second "Man 'o' War." Ronno was galloping beside us, straining his new-found muscles joyously. It was mid-October and the air was like the bubbles that jump out of ginger ale. It tingled on our faces and made us feel as if the world was ours—just to go cantering over.

Then suddenly Ronno stopped. I reined Speed up and watched him. He was sniffing the air,

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looking worried, wheeling round and round. He had caught a scent that called to his nostrils with as much familiarity as a voice to his ears, but he could not place it. Then he started for a nearby coulee. I could not see him, but I could hear him crashing through the underbrush. Soon a yellow figure tore out from the other side and darted over the prairie. It was a coyote. Ronno emerged from the bushes in pursuit. The coyote had about a hundred yards on him and looked to me as if he were almost flying. His paws scarcely seemed to touch the ground and his brush was up like a sail to catch the wind. But Ronno's nose was full of the smell that meant a kill, his eyes were clouded with the vision of a little yellow animal trying to escape him. Yelping, he darted over the ground, long limbs covering eight feet or more in a single bound, lithe body streaming through the air like a comet.

The coyote was fast, but Ronno was faster. He reduced the distance between them until only a few yards separated the killer from his kill. I followed on Speed, hoping to see the finish, but even a prairie bronc is no match for a dog and a coyote when Death or Escape is the alternative.

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They were almost out of sight when Ronno, with a terrific burst of speed, reached the coyote and downed him. But coyotes will fight back. For a moment I could see nothing but a single whirling unit, a mass of tawny hair and flying fur; then the coyote fell and Ronno stood over him alone, and not a little proud, waiting for me to come up to them.

When I got beside him and petted him, the coyote was dead. It was a clean, swift kill, for Ronno had gripped the jugular vein and a stream of blood was coloring the prairie earth.

The pelt was a good one, thick and soft, and the battle had in no way harmed it. Ronno for all his hunger and desire was standing patiently by, waiting for his reward. His jaws were red as he looked up at me and grinned. I always carried a sharp bowie knife with me and it wasn't long before I had the coyote hide tucked into my belt and had thrown the rest to Ronno. He ate with deliberate joy, a gourmet over a long-delayed but cherished feast. Then he went off and buried what he could not finish, coming back to me with a look of complete and utter satisfaction in his eyes and a memory of good things on his tongue as it made circular motions around his jowls.

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I have watched him kill many times since then and it always thrilled me to see him tear across the prairie: a streak on the landscape.

The air was full of indications of approaching winter. It was only a matter of time now when a Northwester would come sweeping down over the prairie and lock the land in its grip of cold; cold that would not break until the spring freshets were let loose and the chinook winds came to cleanse the earth and lay it bare for planting. The threshing was very nearly done and the men were beginning to show that curious change that foretokens an end. They grumbled no longer, but went about their work willingly, knowing it would soon be over, and loth to leave the Northland. There is no call at all for labor there except during the harvesting, so the exodus from the prairie provinces with the first cold weather is as immediate as the influx with the first ripening of grain. Men always feel tender about a place where they have palled together; so it was small wonder that we sniffed with tolerant disgust the air that grew colder every day.

A thin sheet of ice formed on the bucket outside the bunkhouse door. We woke up briskly after sousing our faces in it in the early mornings.

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The days were clear and vitalizing, warm as summer when the sun rode high at noon; but there was a strange scent as of change in the air. Even the animals got it. And as soon as the sun dropped at night it became extremely cold. But the most ominous and sure prediction of the coming winter is the advent of the wild things down from the North, wolves especially. None of the animals were allowed to roam at night, but were housed in the barn or let loose in the walled corral. We were warned, too, but it was not necessary. Every man knew what the lonely howling meant that came on the North wind. Cold had struck the North, bringing famine to the wild things, and the wolves were hungry. We had seen none yet, but we knew well that the winter, icily creeping through the North lands, was driving them on into regions where food and warmth were still abundant. Then one day Mack warned us to be on the watch for a marauding pack that was killing many of the range cattle.

That afternoon was a Saturday and we had laid off work at twelve o'clock. Ronno and I went out coyote-hunting. I did not take Speed, as he had been limping the night before. From the very first, when we were only a few rods

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from the ranch house, Ronno acted oddly. He walked so close to me that my hand rested on his back and he kept turning his eyes upon me with a worried look, trying to tell me that he smelt peril even if I did not. Once he wheeled right around and started toward home, but when I did not follow him he came back after a minute or two. This time his eyes were agonized. He was begging me with all the supplication in him to go home. I thought he was sick, so I felt his nose, but it was cold and his stride had the ease of perfect health.

"Ronno, old boy," I said, "what the devil's up?"

He looked at me and laid his ears flat back on his head. That sign usually meant he was all stirred up inside, but he as much as said that if I was set on going ahead he had no intention of leaving me. So we walked on over the prairie. Everything seemed ominously quiet. Even the busy little meadow-larks, that sing the way city sparrows chatter, were silent. The air was heavy. There was no wind at all. The sky was murky and filled with uncertain clouds. Instead of searching every coulee as was his custom, Ronno glued himself to my side. I threw sticks, but he

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would not chase them. I scolded him for being so lazy, but all he did was turn his great sensitive eyes up at me and nuzzle his soft snout into my hand. His eyes did not rebuke me for my folly in going ahead; they only told how much he loved me.

Suddenly he stopped dead still and, putting his nose up into the air, howled as I had never heard a dog howl before. Then I saw what the trouble was. Perhaps a quarter of a mile ahead of us, the brush in a little patch of timber was swaying suspiciously. I thought of Mack's warning to us only that morning, and my blood ran cold. We were two miles at least from the ranch house; a man and a dog—the dearest enemies of the wolf pack—Ronno defenseless except for his fangs, and I with only a small stick I had picked up in a coulee and had been carrying as a staff. Flight was useless. The nearest trees to climb were in the timber where the wolves were. The nearest coulee was a mile behind us. Ronno and I were alone in a great open piece of prairie land.

In the thicket there was movement again. Furred heads showed through low branches. I wondered how many eyes green with venom were peering at us. I thought of Olsen. I thought of

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home—of my mother—of my father. Then I knew this thing must have a solution. The courage that comes to people when they are stark with horror came to me. I remember thinking of Daniel, and consciously trusting in God. I think I must have prayed, for though I was petrified with dread I was not afraid. (Do you know what I mean?)

The air was proclaiming me to the wolves' nostrils; and a red rag to a bull is as nothing compared with the smell of Man to a wolf. It drives wolves into a killing frenzy, the smell of clean, sweet flesh—a dainty tidbit after their wild diet; while the scent of a dog fills them with hate for their degenerate kin. Wolves despise men, for men have wit while they have only cunning; so wolves have a frenzied hate for dogs, their half-brothers, who cling to Man.

The brush trembled again as the wolves came out of the timber. There were three of them, big, full-bodied males with broad shoulders and lean flanks. They saw us, two lonely things on the wide prairie, and their muzzles went up in a *beau geste* of grim defiance. Their eyes had verified the tale their nostrils told. I was frozen with horror; I could not move nor could I speak

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the one word to Ronno that would have loosed him in his lone battle for his master. He was quivering in every muscle and whining terribly. He must have known it would be an unequal fight, though he was none the less keen for it. But no, I think it is only men who bring a problematical "if" into situations. To a dog a battle must always mean victory. If he is killed, then even that is a kind of triumph, for he has died that someone he loves may live.

Then they came toward us, slowly at first, the three of them—nose to nose and, for the fraction of a second, in rhythmic stride. Theirs was the effortless grace of the pack slowly advancing across a prairie to demoniac assault. In a flash, they broke their stride and began running back and forth nervously, viciously snapping, pacing and leaping, screaming—while Ronno stood alert, unmoving, making not a single sound. Even his fretful whine was silenced. My word has always been his signal. He was waiting for that word and I could not give it.

A wolf's wit is never equal to his fangs; that is why he will curl his lips and show his long teeth, notifying his prey of his power. Insolently snarling, these three circled us slowly, ears flat-

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tened, hackles up, savage growls issuing from slinking bellies concave with hunger. With eyes that were slits of malevolence they hunkered around us, intent on their death watch, licking their jowls in anticipation of a feast. The lead wolf lifted his head. That was all the sign they needed. They started at a run over the intervening space between us—lithe of limb, sure of tread, brushes quivering.

"*Ronno!*" I cried. It was all I could say.

Ronno charged. I saw a brown flash rip through the air as he jumped high and hurled his immense frame against the lead wolf. There was an impact of angry bodies and a whirling of prairie dust as the two locked and rolled over. I beat wildly with my stick in a furious attempt to keep the two other wolves out of the struggle. Over and over they rolled, each seeking for the fatal grip on the jugular vein. Then, above all the din and snarling, I heard distinctly the crunch of jaws on a maned throat. For a moment my heart sank within me. I closed my eyes, half sick with the brutality of it all, and opened them to see through the cloud of dust—the head of the lead wolf as it rolled back on the earth!

I watched Ronno shake himself. Then another

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charge, this time a fresh wolf body against a tired dog. Ronno did not try for his throat; the ruff was thick, and his mouth was full of fur from his first opponent. Instead, he bit near the joint of the wolf's hind flank. His jaws clamped hard and closed with a wicked crunch, nor did they open immediately. There was a splintering of fine bones as they cracked, and a gushing of blood over Ronno's white vest. Ronno let loose his hold, and torn sinews quivered in the wolf's mangled leg. Crazy with pain he went limping away, probably to die in some lonely coulee. If he lived he would always be lame. It shames a wolf to be lame since he cannot then run with the pack, so he slinks around in the rear of his brothers and never does any further real damage.

Ronno backed away a little. The third wolf was standing over the body of the leader, crouched to spring but afraid to. His hackle was up. His brush bristled. His chill howl echoed over the lonely prairie. Ronno shook himself, crouched and hurtled through the air. With two quick movements, he ripped the wolf's scalp and shattered the tendons in his foreleg. The wolf lay helpless on the ground, but still snarled viciously. Hatred poured from his dying eyes, quivered in

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every hair of his tawny hide: hate and viciousness, the only emotions a wolf is capable of, and qualities so alien to a dog that they enrage him. A berserk in his fury, Ronno severed the jugular, and the wolf's head fell back on the earth.

Then Ronno came toward me and sank down at my feet. There was a red gash along his throat—he was bleeding in a dozen places—but he was happy.

The heart of a dog is the heart of all the youth of the world, honeyed with devotion and fortified with strength; his is the impulsive defense of a principle until Death or Triumph is the prize of valor. Ronno was aching in every limb, but he had been of vital service to his master, and that is all the Heaven a dog asks for!

In a few minutes, whose silence seemed blessed after the dread whining of the wolves, Ronno and I dragged the two carcasses toward the distant timber. We buried them roughly, then headed for home; Ronno as proud and self-conscious as a dog can be, grinning all over and thumping his great tail like a carpet-beater. But for all his show he was a weary, bleeding dog, and I, for all my gratitude, was a scared boy.

The air told a story of torn flesh and mangled

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bodies whose death-cry was strangled in their throats; wolves would not come to that part of the country soon again with their slavering jaws and lean bellies, for wolves are leery of a place where wolf blood has stained the soil.

And so Ronno repaid his debt to me. All the way back to the ranch house I thanked God that I had found him, else now I would be little more than a pile of bones in some snowdrift.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BACK at the ranch house everyone plied me with questions about the fight and patted Ronno or threw hunks of meat to him. He grinned in an embarrassed, self-satisfied way and his eyes as much as told me that we were square from then on. The fellows didn't exactly believe me at first when I told them Ronno had tackled three wolves; but, though they doubted my word they could not doubt Ronno's, and his "word" was in his torn and blood-streaked coat and in the eloquent motions of his tongue. They'd always liked Ronno a lot, but from that time on you could have set him up on a gilded throne and the harvesters would have paid tribute to him as reverently as to a king. And Ronno was a king of his kind, for he had the attributes of royalty—dignity and poise and might—and he used them superbly.

I was still feeling pretty nervous and, as there was nothing special on hand to do, Mack, who

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was driving into town; asked some of us to go along with him. Fat and Olsen came, old Pete Dunweely and a couple of others, as many as the car would hold. We started right after supper. It was a rattling old flivver in which we covered those twelve miles between the ranch and Sintaluta, but it seemed like the smoothest thing on earth after the wagons I had been hauling grain in. As it was Saturday night, there was a big crowd in the pool-room; but those bums, no matter how drunk, will always make room for a fellow who comes in with a yarn to tell.

Mack and I marched in with Ronno between us, walking like a king, his white breast still spotted with wolves' blood. The others followed, and we must have looked like a triumphal procession because the gang already there sent up a cheer as soon as we entered. I guess Mack gave a wink to Johnnie, the bartender, for Johnnie said, "Well, boys, here's a round on the house and listen to the kid's story!"

So before I knew what was happening, I was sitting on a table with a mug of Calgary beer in one hand and my other resting on Ronno's head; for he was beside me, licking his dirty paws and grinning, pleased as Punch. The gang in the pool-

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room left their separate tables and the bar and gathered around us. There was a mob of them, too, and the swinging doors seemed to be letting in more all the time. You know, it's funny, but no matter how hard-boiled a guy is his ears will perk up when he hears a story of someone or something he can admire. This time it was a dog story, so the fellows' mouths just about fell open even before I was well started. They're crazy about dogs up there.

In that part of the world, so often called "the last frontier of the pioneers," men have to be brave and dogs have to be brave and horses have to be brave. The very air vibrates with that demand. I think that is why the crops grow so much more bravely there than any place else on earth. The food for Northern spirits is a galvanization of energy. The mush we ate built up our bodies, but the air we breathed built up our souls. And so, since courage was the essential manna, and valor the vital wine, the men were keen to hear of any deed of bravery. These stories travel quickly from mouth to mouth and often in the telling, like a saga, meet with elaboration and varying interpretations; but the central point invariably remains the same, as if the deed in

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itself were so sublime that no added word could improve it.

The bunch around me—and there were more closing in every moment—looked, on the surface, to be about a half a hundred tired harvesters seeking diversion on a Saturday night in town. They were dirty and unshaven. They reeked of toil and grime. Most of them were pretty well in their cups. But they were all quiet and interested while one of them told the simple story of a dog's bravery. For inside, they were men with white hearts and iron wills.

I'd had a couple of mugs of Calgary beer interspersed with my story, so I guess it sounded proportionately higher-toned than the original event, but when I finished telling about Ronno and the wolves such a hurrahing came from the crowd that I was temporarily deafened and wondered how the slim walls of the shack could stand up against the volume of noise. Mugs of beer were raised in the air and clicked together to cries of "Mud in yer eye, Ronno!" "Here's to old King Guts!" "Who said Canada raises wheat? She raises killers!" "*Ronno!*" "RONNO!"

Ronno took it all very calmly. Tired by then, he had stretched out on the table with his long

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nose pressed between his white paws and his tail thumping lazily against the wood. His eyes just roamed about the room, taking it all in with bewildered, though grateful, survey. He seemed like one quite used to adulation, but sufficiently bored by it to appear at ease. Then a new cry came into the cheers. I could not believe what I heard, so I listened and heard it again, only this time much stronger: the ranchers had begun bidding for Ronno! The shouts increased as the harvesters joined in and bid against the ranchers. It was plain that Ronno was greatly desired.

A little guy piped up with an offer of ten dollars, but he was drowned out in the bids that went up to a hundred. I didn't get a chance to answer any of them I was kept so busy shaking my head, but I doubt if I would have been heard through all the din. Ronno knew what was happening, for he moved over a little closer to me on the table and buried his soft snout in my lap, putting his paws over his head as if he did not want to hear.

The fellow who topped the bidding with a hundred bucks called for a round of beer, then another. I guess he figured he'd get me so high that I'd let Ronno go, but I knew there was noth-

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ing could part me from the dog that had saved my life.

I guess Mack thought I'd have a sore neck and would not be able to work if I had to keep on shaking my head against bids all evening, so he went over to the tin piano and crammed a handful of nickels down the slot. The thing started grinding out a song that everyone knew—"O Canada." The men were feeling patriotic by then, since Ronno, their evening's idol, was Dominion born and bred, so they started singing and swinging their mugs in the air. The music kept up until every nickel in Sintaluta was in the tin piano and every bottle of Johnnie's beer had gone to inspire some harvester's susceptible soul.

Suddenly I caught sight of an old friend of mine—Blackeye Magee, sulking in a corner. I don't know what got into me, but I felt delirious from all the excitement around me; and my muscles were keen to go, after old Pete's steady training. So I got off the table and went over to him.

"Want to fight it out now?" I said.

"S'long as ya leave yer mutt out."

"I will."

"Want to see ef yer wu'th yer dog?"

"Fight *for* Ronno?"

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"Sure. He's a good enough stake."

"All right."

I felt sublimely confident. The work on the harvest, Dunweely's coaching, the weight I had put on—all went to making me feel trained to a razor edge. I was ready to take on anyone.

When Magee and I began to make terms with each other, the noisy room suddenly became silent. The men began forming a circle around us, for everyone knew what our conversation meant. Bets were whispered back and forth. Anticipation quivered through the air. The tale of our first fight had traveled far; now this was to be a revenge bout, and that was all that was needed to whip interest into the harvesters, who revel in the lusty glory of a battle.

"No rounds," Magee said, as he pulled off his shirt and shoes.

"No rounds," I agreed, following suit.

"All's fair?"

"Sure."

"Remember—this is fer a championship."

"I know. You showed me once."

"Ready?"

"Come on."

I took a cautious lead to get Magee's range,

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then I danced around him, feinting and trying to bewilder him with action. He let out with a vicious punch. I ducked, and his fist went wild against the air; then I rushed in. We closed. He pushed me off and rallied so that he came back with a smart jab that just missed blinding me. I saw red then. I wasn't mad exactly, for you can't fight when you're mad—it ties you more than ropes. But my blood was up, and a fellow's got to get his blood up before he'll fight worth a nickel.

I stepped back and Magee shot in with his right. Then I crossed with all I knew. It was a snowstorm of bare knuckles. He clipped me on the ear, and I came back with a punch to the heart that sent him staggering. Slowly he struggled forward and lunged at me, only to miss again. Blackeye was getting tired. Dunweely had showed me how to worry a man with speed and skillful timing, and that was what Blackeye didn't know how to take. He had no ammunition against a clever fighter's barrage. I still felt so fresh that the bout hardly seemed fair. It was bound to be a walk-away.

"What's up, champ, lettin' a kid beat you?"

"Get into it, you old feather-pillow puncher!"

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"That's my hay-making baby!" Old Pete's voice was above the rest.

Blackeye stopped slugging; his strength was wearing out for that. Instead, he swung like a lunatic—jabbed, and poked. It was wild fighting but it kept his defense up, because I still couldn't seem to get through to him with a K.O. punch. He slashed out with his left and pawed me all over, his arms going like pistons. The fusillade of his blows was as ineffectual as the tattoo of a hammer. Under them I felt my flesh glowing angrily, but none of them went home enough to matter. They only served to get my blood up all the more.

"Go on, buddy, you've played long enough!" Olsen cried from the fringe of the crowd. Then somewhere, way back behind all the spectators, I heard Ronno's lusty yelp, and I remembered in a flash what the fight was for.

I backed up enough to measure my punch, led with a left, crossed with a right, and for a moment put up a fire of short jabs; then with all the force I had in me I spilled my dynamite on his sullen old mug. It went home to the button, that switch-board of the nerves. Blackeye Magee staggered across the floor and crumpled under: a messed-up

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bundle of scarlet flesh and torn skin. . . . Ten counts. . . . My fist had put him to sleep.

"Ye did it, kid! I knew ye would!" Old Dunweely was exultant.

"Thanks, Pete," for I knew it was his training that had shown me some sense about fighting.

The tin piano started up again, and the beer mugs waved. Cheers and songs filled the room and praise from honest hearts for a boy and his dog. This fight had made me the hardest hitter of the territory, and I don't believe that any title or distinction I may win during my whole life will ever thrill me more than that one did. Ronno and I had fought for each other, in a single day each of us proving himself worthy of the other. It was a tale that would be told often in the North, and I guess I needn't say that I was a pretty thrilled kid.

It was about two A.M. when we all started back to the ranch. We'd had much too much beer to be good for anyone's soul, but—I still had Ronno!

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE first of November came and threshing was over. The grain was stored securely in the granaries and the straw left in great stacks and mounds, like Gargantuan ant-hills dotting the prairie. Only one job remained before the season's work was done: burn those stacks of straw. But this was left for the last night—Armistice night and a dual celebration—when the harvesters put torches to them and the flames leap up in a final, mute farewell to the Northland. It is the grand finale to labor, a sort of hilarious jamboree before the men start on their long trek east or south or west, away from the North for another year.

We spent that last day in cleaning up the machinery we'd been using during the harvest, taking it apart and putting it away. Mack went around to the men separately, figuring up how much he owed each harvester. We laughed a lot, and swore at each other more that day than we

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had all summer, for we knew that in a little while now we would all be heading in different directions and we were sorry that the work was over. It was a lazy man's working day, that last one, and we loafed sublimely.

After noon-time dinner, Fat and Olsen and I got together around the stove in the bunkhouse. It had been cold lately so the fire was up. We'd been a good working corporation ever since that first night out of Toronto, and we weren't keen on splitting up. Olsen brought out a shabby map from under the blankets of his bunk. It was thumbed and dirty and the edges were frayed: the beloved possession of an unsentimental man. He spread it out on the floor and shook his head slowly over it. The whole North American continent lay before us, but Olsen knew there was no place on it for the three of us together. He laid a grubby finger on a portion of Michigan and said, "Fat's got a wife down there and he'd ought to go back to her."

"To hell with the old woman!" Fat returned amiably.

Olsen did not move his finger, but looked at Fat in his indisputable way. "Man, what's yours is yours, and you got to stick by it." Then he

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moved his finger down the map till it stopped at New York. It left a grimy trail behind it.

"That's where the kid is goin' to."

"Gee, Olsen, I don't want to go back to school and everything," I said quickly.

Olsen looked at me with his kind, almost stupid eyes. He reminded me of Ronno when his gaze says that, although he cannot tell me, he knows better.

"This ain't yer life, youngster. You've got a job to do down there." Then he went on sadly, "You know, kid, it's only the misfits, the fellows who made a mistake somewhere, that give just their *hands* to life. You've got a *head* and a *soul*—those count more than muscle."

I don't think I quite understood what he meant, then. Perhaps I don't now, but I took his word for it. His word had always been good. From New York, Olsen's finger extended its grimy trail to Newfoundland, hesitated for a moment with a triangle lacking one side, then went on up into the Northern regions, varied slightly from its course, grew fainter and finally lost itself in the frozen Arctic. The triangle stayed open. Olsen was free.

I could not take my eyes off the map. There

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was a fascination in the condensation of space before me. Every region was calling me. I seemed to hear rivers rocketing through the night and see great trees bending. Mountain shadows were flattening out across desert wastes. Icebergs gleamed. Painted Arctic skies glowed. The North was a land of desire, a world of hidden secrets, of daring against Death, of human wit against inhuman elements, of skill against might, of frost-bound beauty against frozen flesh. I looked up suddenly to see Olsen staring at me. His eyes were not stupid and kind any longer. They were puzzled, afraid. Suddenly he crumpled the map in his hands, took the lid off the stove and thrust the continent of North America into the red coals that ate it greedily.

"For God's sake, boy, don't let the call get into yer blood. It's not for you." He spat on the hot iron. It hissed. Then he turned and walked out of the bunkhouse.

Fat looked at me. "What the hell's eatin' that guy? He gone loony?"

"I don't know," I said, feeling a little awed as I realized how much Olsen meant to me.

"He always was crazy," Fat dismissed the epi-

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sode laconically as he hoisted his feet up on the stove. "Too bad to burn that map, though."

After supper on Armistice night we waited until it was dark, then went out to the corral and got horses. I rode Speed, of course, and Ronno ran alongside. The other men rode the team broncs. Each one carried a torch: a piece of heavy cotton soaked in oil and bound on a stick. At the last moment we lit our torches and started out across the prairie. We must have made a strange picture through that dark night: twenty-odd men clustered in the corral on twenty-odd fretting ponies; then, with firebrands burning and held high, galloping off across the fields, each one headed for a different straw stack whose outline was just dimly visible against the blackening sky.

You understand that every time the thresher was moved from one location to another it left a huge stack of straw behind it. It was moved some thirty times during the threshing and so left some thirty stacks, which were about forty feet high and fifty wide. One or two such stacks provide the ranches with ample bedding and fodder during the winter, so the ones nearest the corral and barns are left for that purpose. The

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others are burned. To an Easterner who is accustomed to saving every wisp of straw for use, this may seem gross waste; but when one considers the great quantity of grain that is threshed on the Western ranches, one realizes that nine-tenths of the straw is absolutely worthless to the farmer. Some day the progress of the straw-paper industry will create a demand for these waste mounds, but that day is still far off and until then one of the chief pleasures of the harvesters is burning the stacks before they leave the North.

The men issuing from the corral with their brands spread out in all directions. It was a game among us to see how many stacks a man could light, and when we returned the air was full of cries of "I set six burning—how 'bout you?" as the men compared their numbers.

It took a very short time to do this, since the flaming brand needed only to be passed near the dry straw when the entire stack would splutter and crackle and shoot up like a rocket of fire into the dark night. The semicircle of stacks covered an area of several miles, but with men galloping about in all directions the straw was soon ignited and all the mounds were burning. It was a beautiful sight: those thirty stacks dotting the dark

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horizon, burning simultaneously in single shafts of fire. They reminded me of ancient signal fires, spelling out a message that only the initiated could interpret, as only the harvesters knew the import of this present message: the end. FINIS was being branded all over the dark sky. Then again, those great pyramids of flame were like funeral pyres of useless material, for men had winnowed from the harvest all that other men could use. It brought to my mind very clearly a parallelism with the parable of the wheat and the tares when Jesus told His apostles of the householder who said to his servants (Matthew 13:30), "*Let both [the wheat and the tares] grow together until the harvest; and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn.*" It was thrilling to me to find that today's illustration fitted so perfectly the Bible's teaching, but I wished that it were always so easy to separate what is good from what has no value whatsoever.

We watched the stacks burn until it was late, until the flames that had shot high enough to lick the sky had gone down into coals, so that all over the prairie there were just gleaming red places,

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like giant 'wolves' eyes. Then Mrs. Mack called us over to the ranch house for some hot Java and mush.

It tasted pretty good, for the night was cold and we were feeling "gone" by then. When we had finished eating (or as near to finishing a meal as harvesters ever get, which means when the food is all gone; for if the food were to stretch on like India rubber so would our appetites!)—out with the old concertina. We sang and made music while some of us led Mrs. Mack off in a clumsy square dance across the kitchen floor. She laughed until the tears rolled down her face. The Dane played until his arms ached; the onlookers sang until they were hoarse; while round and round the kitchen floor we spun in a regular old-fashioned dance.

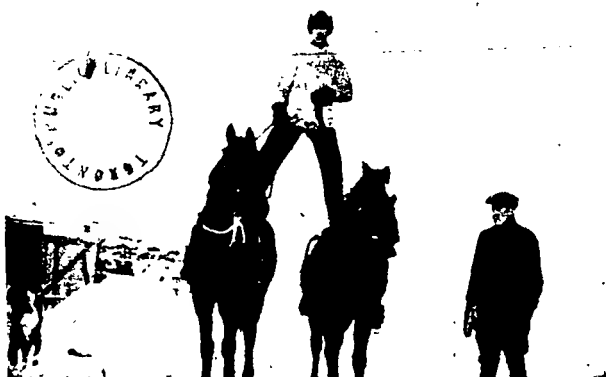
It was late when we went trooping back to the bunkhouse with the red eyes still glowing at us from the prairie, and it was dreadfully cold.

Olsen looked up at the bright stars overhead. "She'll blow tonight," he prophesied, with the assurance of one whom the weather could not fool. And he was right, for the next morning a Northwester came down from Alaska.

Everybody knew we were in for it, and sure



Grain waiting for Eastern market.



I had a taste of the Northern winter.

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enough before noon it hit us full square. It's all right to watch a blizzard come stampeding across a prairie when you've got a house that will stand up against it; but when it comes yowling and screaming and whistling in insolent might about a place as flimsy as our bunkhouse, that's a different matter. It hit us with the force of a hurricane, blowing furiously and slapping snow around so hard that we wondered—if it kept up—how long our tin chimney could remain uncovered, and it was our only means of ventilation.

There was nothing for us to do but sit around the stove and try to keep warm. Occasionally the wind would blow a slat in; as often as this happened, the harvester whose turn it was would get up from the circle around the stove, patch up the place that had blown in and scoop up in a pail the snow that had seeped in with the wind. We used this melted snow for water, drinking and other, since there was no way of obtaining any more. No one can possibly know what cold is until he has huddled together with a bunch of stinking humans just to keep from freezing. I thought enviously then of herded sheep, for at least their wool can keep them warm; but a man next you may have cold hands, and the touch of

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them is enough to freeze away the slight heat the stove has made.

The first night it dropped to ten below, the second to twenty-six, and so on till it hit forty, the low mark for that time of year. And the blizzard blew for three days!

Ordinarily the harvesters have left the North when the first cold comes, but this time it took us unawares and with the vehemence of a January gale. Fortunately the cook car was close to the bunkhouse or we might have gone hungry during the three days, marooned by snow and cold. As it was we had to drag the supplies—foodstuffs and coal—into our quarters the first day. The snow was heaping up so that we knew it would be impossible to make the trips back and forth after one day. There was no air in the bunkhouse. We dared not open the door for fear the draught would lift the roof off, so the only fresh currents that came in—to lose their freshness quickly in the foulness of cooking food and stinking bodies—were those that forced themselves in when a slat gave way. But we did not want any air. Men can grow used to a stench, but cold can increase until the blood turns sluggish with frost and the feel of frozen hands is enough to

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strike terror into a heart no matter how stalwart.

Still, it was a new thing to me and like all the other new things up there I got quite a kick out of it. The cold was so dry I hardly seemed to feel it and would not believe the fellows when they told me it was forty under the line.

On the third day I went out on my shift to feed the horses. We had attached a rope from the bunkhouse to the barn so we could feel our way along and pull ourselves against the driving storm. We worked in pairs and in turn, as it was no job to be coveted. I had been cautioned to hang on to the rope and not under any condition to let go of it in the space between the bunkhouse and the barn. One of the Canucks started out with me. We got to the barn all right and fed the horses. The barn was a good deal warmer than the house because the steam from the animals kept charging the air with moisture, but the filth was such that it almost cut short the passage of breath to one's lungs. I was choking terribly until I learned from the Canuck to open my shirt, stick my head in and breathe through several layers of woolen: a makeshift mask.

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We had covered about half the distance on the trip back when I stumbled; forgetting my warning, I let go the rope. My hands were so cold that the slightest pull made them lose all their strength, but my will should have kept me on the rope. I tried to cry for help, but the cold air cut the sound short in my throat. I gasped for breath and my mouth filled with snow. I fought for a moment to recover the rope, but each struggling gesture of my arms caused me to sink further down into the snow. Then I could fight no longer. Cold and weak, I realized that I was being slowly buried. I sank deeper and deeper. Everything was white around me. I became distinctly conscious of feeling very warm. A strange sensation made me certain that I was lying in the heart of one of the flaming straw stacks, yet not being burned. I remembered nothing after that.

When the Canuck entered the bunkhouse without me, Olsen was the first to ask where I was. The Canuck guessed "mebbe in de barn" and Olsen gave him such a sock in the jaw that he didn't eat for a week, for an unwritten law in the North is never to leave a man when the two of you are making a snow-journey on a rope.

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Olsen put on his jacket and started out for me. He told me later that he wanted to take Ronno, but did not dare. By then, snow had drifted over me so that I was completely covered and I was rather far away from the rope line. Olsen went back for Fat and together they strung up a new line about six feet from the other. They figured that I would be within those six feet. Then with a couple more men they carried on their search. It must have been almost hopeless, four men in the face of a blinding blizzard clinging with their hands to a rope line and kicking with their feet for the body of their pal. For I don't believe they ever expected to find me alive. Finally Olsen stumbled across me. Then he and Fat, one hand never loosening its grip on the line and one hand on me, dragged me back to the bunkhouse. It must have been a dreadful journey for them.

Olsen undoubtedly had a way of charming people back to life, for he brought me to as quickly as he had Ronno. I remember waking up lying in a bunk and seeing Olsen rubbing me with snow. It made me wild for a moment that he should wake me with snow from my lovely dream of warmth. I wanted to hit him and tell him

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to leave me alone, but my nerves began to tingle and the pain kept me quiet. When I started to thaw out I learned what pain really was. I seemed to be learning a lot of things out West.

The next day the storm let up with the suddenness with which it had pounced upon us. We watched it as it swept across the prairie, a swirl of driving white, on its way to hold other habitations in its grip. The sun came out, omnipotent and just a little apologetic that it had failed us so long. It shone brightly and was reflected on the mirror-like surface of the earth. The world, which had been golden when I first arrived, was transformed by the sudden touch of winter into a sheet of shimmering white. I never knew anything the word "virginal" could describe until I saw that expanse of shining purity. But the white snow made one's eyes ache. One could not look too long. It was like the ancients who might have a glimpse of Deity, but—woe to those who glanced overlong!

That was the end for the harvesters. There was nothing more for them and they began to go. One after another, during the days that followed, they checked out. All their belongings—for they were true bums—could be contained in

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a bandanna, and so they slung their bit of luggage over a shoulder well used to a heavier load and went away. I watched them go. Some went on broncs; others in wagons down to Sintaluta, there to jump a rattler; many along the hard trail of the icy road. Not a man there had a definite objective, but they were all going.

"Well, lad, I guess I'll hit along to some place else. It's done with here."

"Buddy, my address is the good old earth. Drop me a card some day."

I shook hands with them, wishing them luck. We were all pals. We had lived and worked and fought and talked together. We had brought the wheat in for a nation's bread. That in itself is a bond which men find hard to break.

"When you're the heavyweight champ o' the world I'll still call you 'kid'!" Fat laughed.

Olsen said, "Youngster, I don't know where we'll meet again, but tramps always find each other somewhere."

So they all went, and Ronno and I watched them go.

Every man was answering the call of a Chimeric "some place else." Many were going to the gold mines and lumber camps of the Canadian woods;

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some to the orange groves of the South; some to the construction camps and open roads of the Middle West; others to erection gangs on skyscrapers in great cities; and still others, to whom laziness was bliss, would see that some minor offense kept them wintering in a comfortable jail. Every man-jack of them believed that the road ahead led to labor and loafing, sober days and drunken nights, toil and sleep, and somewhere, some time—rest. Each had a sweetheart: the road that stretched away before him, a limber girl, forever young and never twice the same; one to whom they were ever loyal; one whose sole desire was answered by their own. Wherever they were going, they knew they'd get there; it didn't matter when or how.

Most of them didn't know what to do with the money they'd made on the harvest, and since it got in their way the best means of freeing themselves of it was to drink it down in beer. So they did. Lofty devils, loyal pals, careless of fame and fortune, faithful only to the road that led away, to the desire of their hearts. There was a pretty big lump in my throat when I saw the last one go.

CHAPTER NINE

It was all over, yet I did not want to go; not for a while anyway. I did not want to get back into a stuffy city and a stuffier school, and besides, since I had seen what the summer and the fall were like in the Northwest I was keen to get a little sniff of the winter there. So when Mack asked me to stay on and haul grain for him I accepted gladly.

After the men had gone we rolled the bunkhouse and the cook car up alongside one of the barns, then we took the wheels off them and boarded up the doors. I felt no sentimental regrets in saying good-bye to the place that had housed me as a harvester, for there had been no comfort connected with it; but up North one learns to get used to anything and to be thankful for it. From now on, I was to live in the ranch house with the Macks. It was the typical Western farmhouse, rather low and securely built and not much that wasn't kitchen. What wasn't kitchen was cellar, used to store supplies in, and

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a funny little three-cornered room upstairs where the Macks slept. There was also a small room downstairs which was kept scrupulously neat and had in it all the things that were not in immediate use: a few books, some stiff chairs, a melodeon, views of the Tower of London and of sheep grazing on a Sussex hillside. Like all country parlors the room was opened only on special occasions. Weddings, funerals and annual visits from the local minister called for a rolling up of the shades and a puffing out of the pillows. Needless to say, this did not occur during my stay with them.

It was a great thing for me to spend some time with them in their warm, friendly ranch house. Mrs. Mack was very kindly and her cooking—after the slush I had been living on for three months—tasted like the gods' nectar and ambrosia! All our living went on in the kitchen. It was a bright, sunshiny room full of warmth and the pleasant smell of things cooking. My idea of Heaven then was of a place with a big stove, a place that was warm.

The Macks had had a son—a fine, husky boy, from his pictures—with lots of hair and earnest eyes and a great big body. He was just twenty-

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one when the War came along and he had gone over with one of the first Canadian contingents. He had been in France only a few weeks when a notice came from the War Department that he would not be back again. I guess it was pretty hard for them for a while to think of carrying on without him, for he had been big enough to help Mack with the last few harvests and they had counted on him a lot. While the boy was growing up Mack had worked doubly hard to increase his land and its yield. That was why his wheat was so well known in that locality. His heart as well as his muscle had gone into the reaping and sowing, and the grain of his harvest was twice as rich and golden as that of his neighbors. He wanted the boy to come into something he would be proud of; something that would call on all his young energy of soul and body to maintain the high standard his father had set. Mack had won prizes with his wheat at local fairs, but he wanted the boy to win prizes at international expositions. Then, just as Donald Mack was old enough to come into all this golden heritage, he gave his life away that expositions might still be international.

It was rough on Mack, but when spring came

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around again he went ahead with the sowing. Year in and year out after that he worked sullenly and determinedly on the harvest, but now without an incentive; slowly giving his life away that wheat might still grow golden, and hungry people might have bread. He never spoke of his son again. It was Mrs. Mack who told me of the boy, during one of the long evenings when we sat alone by the fire while Mack was puttering out in the barn. She said that Mack had never wanted to have youngsters work on the harvest since Donald couldn't, but that she guessed he had taken a fancy to me because I looked like the boy in whom such hopes had centered. I realized then that they were just two lonely people growing older every day, because they had no one young to live in.

A day or two after the men left, Mack went in to Sintaluta to get his grain contract before I started hauling it into the elevators. He came back with a batch of mail for me, as much as I had ever got in the West. It was awfully cheering, but some people on the outside made me laugh: for instance, a friend of mine at school who said in his letter that I should come home because they needed me on the football squad.

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I answered Red, telling him to run around the corner, for I'd like to see the day that I'd come home from this to play football; I'd just as soon play tiddledewinks! I told him about Olsen, that white and wonderful fellow, and I tried to tell him that the experience I was having was worth ten times what I'd be learning in school. Life in the West was teaching me to mingle with men and to meet things on my own. Those seemed pretty important for me to learn now, for I'd surely need them later on. I told him, too, that when I went home I knew that he and everyone else would find a better and wiser fellow named Bob Y. But I guess Red will understand, because he ~~is~~ the kind of guy who will be able to see—and won't be afraid to admit—how much good this has done me. Perhaps I am making a lot of money, but it's not that that I care so much about; it's the wonderful experience I'm getting and the fine condition it's putting me in—and I don't mean just physically, either. Why, I wouldn't go back for anything until I've seen this through. Red says he's worried about me! I wish he'd snap out of it and not worry about every little thing like a kid who can't take care of himself.

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A letter from my mother tells me to have a greater trust in God, to have hope and faith; but I feel that now I've really found those things, while before they were only words. We don't usually discover things until we have to, but up there I *had* to. A fellow has to learn things for himself some time or other and the sooner he does it the better. He can apply them then to his daily living. But I'll tell the world it's wonderful to have the kind of mother that can make these things so attractive to a fellow that he wants to have them in his life!

It's funny that I don't hear from my girl, but maybe she's found someone better. You never can tell what these young girls will fall for nowadays.

A paper came through with the mail. It was full of the Tunney-Dempsey fight in Philadelphia, and Tunney won the way I thought he would. He's a hero of mine because he's a great fellow. I think if a boy has a hero it should be a possible one, not a mythical Ulysses or a dead Napoleon, but somebody real and honest-to-goodness, like Tunney and Lindbergh and Edison and Henry Ford and Admiral Byrd, and that other unsung one whom no one knows but who has meant so

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much to me—Olsen. Most of the great men today are self-made. That's almost become a requirement for greatness, and that's the kind of man a boy wants to admire: a fellow who is living now, facing the same problems he'll have to face some day and getting over them the way he hopes to get over them, not someone who died a hundred years ago. Progress only belongs to those who look ahead, so if a boy wants a hero (and who doesn't?) he had better choose a fellow who's looking ahead, too.

No one could ever know what a letter meant up there. It might be only a few words, but that was enough to keep the fire up.

My job from then on was to haul grain into town on a box sleigh with a four-horse team. Of course, Ronno always accompanied me. If it had not been for him I think I would have gone crazy from the lonely bleakness of those white prairies. It was a twelve-mile road-haul to Sintaluta, and sometimes it seemed to me that I was traversing all the distance in the world, the cold was so insistent and the locomotion so slow. It was hard pulling, for the roads were packed hard with snow. Often, after a chinook wind had blown and melted the top crust, and then a cold night had frozen

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it again, the roads were coated with ice. There were several hills to cross during the trip in; and these, that had once seemed to me to be but higher elevations in a gently undulating plain, had now, out of the stark winter landscape, assumed Brobdingnagian proportions. Standing on the crest of an abysmal hollow, I used to wonder how I could get my horses down the slope and up the next steep.

The first time I made a road-haul, the way was crusted with ice. I did not know how to manage the horses on the hills, so, being scared and unwilling to trust to their instinct, I held them back. It was a foolish thing to do, for going down the hill the sleigh nearly ran over them and at the bottom one of the horses slipped and fell. It took me an hour to get him straightened up and broken harness mended. Then when I looked up I saw before me the pleasant prospect of a steep, ice-coated incline, and we had to get up it somehow. It was like facing the ascent of a toboggan slide, but with a four-horse team and a heavy load of grain. . . . In about three hours we reached the top.

By the time another slope and consequent rise appeared before me I had learned a very impor-

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tant little trick—to guide horses over ice and run them down ~~one~~ the hill so fast they have impetus to carry them up the next. It was a ticklish job and it took a lot of nerve, to whip a four-horse team into a gallop down an icy hill. The horses nearly skated all the way, but, after all, the grain had to reach town somehow. I felt about as happy as an escaped convict when I got back to the ranch house that night, the load delivered and the horses O. K.

Day after day, this went on with the same routine and relentlessness that seemed to pursue all the jobs in the Northwest. It was slow work and consequently depressing. Except on the hills I had to walk the horses all the way into town because the load was so heavy. I would have frozen several times over if I had not tramped along behind the wagon just to keep warm. I never could quite decide which was harder on a man: a heavy, gray day with a frosty wind blowing, or a clear, brilliant one with an unrestrained sun riding high; both had their drawbacks. The gray day was intense with cold; in only a few moments the chill of the Northland would penetrate me so that I often wondered whether I could ever get warm again. The bright day had its

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danger of making a man snow-blind. For when the noon sun shines unreservedly over a tableland of snow, white as far as the eye can see, the glare reflected is more severe than any words of mine can describe. Snow-blindness comes quickly, often without warning. Suddenly a man, plodding slowly over a white prairie, will become aware that the sun has developed strange hues. Instead of a golden ball poised in an arc of blue, streaks of magenta and scarlet, purple and black, will dance out from a fiery center and quiver over the snow. The jets of color soon give way to wheels and rockets, an intense and panoramic Fourth-of-July display. Then the light goes black. And there is nothing to do but give the broncs the reins and let them take you home. Snow-blindness is not dangerous except when it makes you lose your trail. The North is full of terrible stories of winter prospectors whose bodies have been found in the spring, alone in a snowdrift, and near each body the faithful pony who had been unable to find the way.

Ronno was always with me, and it was his steadfast devotion that gave me a lot of courage. Most of the time he'd just walk quietly beside me, nuzzling his soft snout into my hand. Some-

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times he'd dart off into the brush, scare up a couple of rabbits and give them a chase over the snow. It was a pretty thing to watch him and he got a lot of fun out of it himself. He'd make his kill cleanly, eat enough to satisfy his hunger and then bury the rest. Ronno was figuring on staying there all winter, so he saw to it that he had plenty of private caches along the way, each one with a nice little delicatessen array for him. He did not realize that I had other plans for both of us, but I knew that wherever I went Ronno would rather go than stay behind. Ronno had a look in his eyes which seemed to say that some time long ago he had digested certain poignant verses of the Book of Ruth.

To break the loneliness and the white silence of the prairies, I used to sing all the time and in full voice. It was glorious. I had never before been able to let go with my vocal cords as long and as loud as I wanted to. The cold air rushing in was an exulting stimulus and I soon felt as if I could win any contest in chest expansion. I sang everything I could remember—cowboy songs, church hymns, football yells, popular melodies, and scales. The horses had a liberal education in music. Sometimes Ronno would lift up his long

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head and bay—the full sound narrowing down to the fine thread of a wail. I never could discover whether his note was given in protest or as a chorus. However, it all helped, for it was a lonely white world, and from the ranch house into Sintaluta I was its only human inhabitant.

As soon as we reached town I'd warm up at the pool-room, but when the days were biting cold I was leery of staying there too long for fear I'd never be able to stand the trip back. After a mug of coffee and a hunk of steer meat, I'd take my load over to the grain elevators, unload, and get paid in cash. There are about fifteen hundred grain elevators in Canada that store wheat for the farmers. They have two ways of disposing of it; handling it on commission, and buying it at the current market value. Mack preferred the latter. He thought it better to get rid immediately of a stock whose value fluctuates. At all the main elevators, there is a Dominion weighmaster who weighs the wheat. This is done in order that the high grade of Canadian wheat may be maintained and assured. The grain is then shipped from the elevators to the flour mills, most of which are centered in Ontario, but many are scattered about through the other provinces.

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Thus Canada is able to export annually the proud amount of ten million barrels of flour.

After I had seen that the grain was looked after and had Mack's money safely tucked away—if the day was cold—I'd give a yelp for Ronno, jump in the empty sleigh and set the horses' noses toward home. One touch of the reins on the little broncs' backs and we were off at a dead gallop. It took me five hours to get to Sintaluta, and one hour and a quarter to get home!

There were many days when the chinook winds blew across the prairies and the air was mild; then I'd hang around the pool-room, the general meeting-place of Sintaluta, and listen to the stories that were told there. These were many and of strange origin, for the men who now passed the time of day there were odd characters from all over the earth. There were harvesters from regions farther North, stopping on their trek back home for an hour's cheer and some warm food; there were men with dog-teams mushing through to the gold fields; trappers with furs, on their way to the trading posts; farmers going East before the new spring demanded their time again—a miscellany of men, all on a mission or an adventure, all with their stories to tell.

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I used to love to hear these men talk of their province, Saskatchewan, for most of them were in some way indigenous to it. If not native-born, their hearts were held there, and they felt the same pride as those who had grown up with the land. These were men in whose mouths such a name as Saskatchewan should linger—broad-shouldered and swart, strong-flanked, iron-nerved and steel-hearted: men whose right it was to live in Saskatchewan, for the sound of the name alone echoes of the North and of all the danger and adventure the North implies; men with the cry of youth in their hearts, and in their souls the need of a wilderness for them to conquer. *Sas-katch-e-wan*: the sound rings out like a song of glory seen and done!

The name, as may be easily surmised, is of Indian origin. *Kis sis katchewan* Sepee was the name they gave to the Saskatchewan river, that Missouri of the North. "Swift," or "angrily flowing," is its meaning, and from that the river came to be called by them the Swiftflowing Water.

All these men who had come from strange places, and were perhaps headed for stranger ones, would beguile a few hours away with stories while they warmed up in the pool-room. True

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or not, they were thrilling tales, and certainly held spellbound any of us who were gathered about. One of the old customs is that if a man's tale is voted by a general burst of applause to be pretty fine he can have whatever he wants in the house. I guess that accounted for the rivalry among the yarn-spinners.

But the grandest tales I ever heard were those told by the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, more familiarly known as the Redcoat Riders. And these were men to admire, I'll tell the world! When one considers that an efficient patrol of armed men is maintained from the United States line to the gates of the Arctic, one realizes what a tremendous organization they are. If trouble occurs: a prairie fire breaks out, a rustler tries to get away with some cattle, or a man is murdered—a Redcoat Rider seems to be on the spot immediately. Their reward is small save for the assistance they render, but their thanks are in the gratitude of every settler. They are picked men of skill and courage. Vigilance and retribution are their watchwords, and when once on a man-hunt they are relentless. It may take years and cost the lives of many of their own men, but they always get their man. They have officers, of

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course, but it is really a body in which every man is a captain. They give orders to themselves, and each man is obedient to his own sense of authority. One Redcoat Rider often takes the place of a whole militia, and his personal command creates order.

One afternoon I stayed too long in the pool-room and when I went outside the cold was so biting that the hour-and-a-quarter trip home filled me with dread. It darkened early those days, and the half-light, lingering before the night, made the snow look more cruel than ever. There were a few people on the main street, going to or from some place, for no one stayed out for the air long these days, and the sight of them made the little town of Sintaluta seem like a city of human volcanoes—the breath coming from their nostrils congealed by the terrific cold into a steamy vapor. Every man seemed to emit a little puff of steam like a volcanic sputtering. I was fascinated by the strange sight until the tips of my fingers and toes warned me to make some decision, so I stabled my team and loafed around town that night.

It was worth it, for the colder the night that settles down over a Northwestern town, the more

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fluent the imaginations of its inhabitants. The tales ran high that evening, and the empty bottles of Calgary beer piled up behind the bar. About ten o'clock I went over to the Chinks' to get a bed for the night. That was a quarter-a-flop place. Your bed was yours so long as you stayed in it, but if you got up, another fellow got in and you'd be out another twenty-five cents if you wanted more sleep.

With the first streak of dawn I left to harness my broncs. The morning air bit my cheeks until they tingled and it must have nipped the ponies even through their heavy coats, for they were raring to go. As soon as Ronno and I jumped into the sleigh, we let loose over the white road home. The ponies strained neck to neck. Ronno held his great head up to let the wind stream by in all its invigorating splendor, and I, standing on the box with a whip I didn't need in one hand and similarly useless reins in the other, felt like an old Roman in a chariot race: but my Coliseum was the snow banks on either side, my spectators the dawn winds, and my only prize was the reaching of my destination before the cold could take its toll of frost-nipped flesh.

When we came speeding up to the ranch, the

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noise we made clattering over the road woke Mack. Following Western custom, which is "When in doubt shoot first, and find out why later," he stuck his gun out of the window and fired. You see, he thought I had been killed or frozen the day before, or I would have been back that night; and, as he was figuring on the grain and not the driver, he fired to save his grain from being stolen by a stranger or run away with. He didn't know which, and he never stopped to find out. But it didn't matter. The shot just skinned one of the horses' ears and when Mack came out and found who it was, he was as pleased as anything to see me.

After three weeks or so I was ready to quit. The grain was pretty well despatched and there was nothing much to do now but wait around for planting-time in the spring. I had seen the harvest through, toiled with the wheat from the time it stood on a stalk to the time when it was ready for milling. I had got a taste of what a Northern winter was, and now I felt ready to close the doors on my adventure and go back to the life that was a permanent part of my being.

Mrs. Mack was very kind when I said good-bye and told me she hoped I'd be up with the

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next harvest. She said, "It's been good to have a boy again," and I tried to tell her what it had meant to me to be there. When the work was hard it was all right just to live like a tough harvester, but when the men began to go and the cold closed down and I felt just a little lonely, it was pretty nice to find a home with them and to be treated like their own. I hated to leave. They had been so good to me and the West had been such a glorious experience.

I rode Speed in to Sintaluta and sold him back to Traverse Jones for seven dollars. It was tough to see him go, but—after all, you can't get sentimental about a little bronc who'll run ten or twelve miles without stopping and then buck you off!

Mack met me in the saloon for a final rouser of beer. He said, "There's always work for a lad whose heart is in his muscle. Come up next summer. I'll put you on, and the wheat crop is bound to be bigger than ever." Then he paid me off and we shook hands as casually as if he were going to see me next week.

I made the rounds shaking hands with the old-timers, the barber and Bill at the pool-room, Johnnie, the bartender, and a couple of others.

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Then, just before the winter night came down,
I started out to catch a rattler that would take
me east to Civilization and Home. So I said
good-bye to Sintaluta. I could not but remember
how, when I had first got there, that flimsy, dirty
little town looked like the worst place on earth
to me. But I had been a stranger then; now, it
was a different matter—leaving—for as soon as
you know what's back of the scenery a place means
a lot more.

I started down the road, just ahead of the
winter night, singing to myself a verse of Arthur
Conan Doyle's *Athabasca Trail*:

I'll dream again of fields of grain that stretch from sky
to sky,
And the little prairie hamlets where the cars go roar-
ing by,
Wooden hamlets as I saw them—noble cities still to be—
To girdle stately Canada with gems from sea to sea.

CHAPTER TEN

ALL the money I had was in my money belt, about three hundred dollars. It seemed like the combined riches of the world, for every penny of it had literally been earned with a drop of honest sweat. My return ticket for the Harvesters' Excursion was good on any train going East, so Ronno and I started tramping along the ties in the late afternoon of that end-of-November day. But I never had to use that ticket. (I still have it, and it is one of my most treasured possessions.) For a short way out of Sintaluta, Ronno and I were lucky in catching a rattler that was going down to Toronto. The freight had come through from Swift Current and Moosejaw, those thriving commercial centers of the wheat country, and had already a couple of bums going home. So we stowed ourselves away in the caboose with the other tramps who were leaving the North.

The towns we went through up North have appropriate and self-explanatory names. For instance, Moosejaw. In the early days Lord

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Dunsmore, a pioneer settler, was crossing the prairie. When he was in a lonely part of Saskatchewan one of the wheels of his covered wagon broke down. He could not go on without mending it, but to all appearances there was nothing to mend it with. Lord Dunsmore trusted and waited. After a while a moose came along. The settler shot and killed him; then he mended the wheel of the wagon with the jawbone of the moose. The busy town marking that spot today commemorates in its name, Moosejaw, the patience and initiative of one of its pioneer settlers. The towns up North tell their stories in their names, and in many cases weave their origin or pursuit into the daily lives of their inhabitants.

It was nineteen hundred miles down to Toronto, and the cargo of the train was cattle. For five days and nights we sat around the stove, our numbers increasing daily as we picked up more fellows trekking home. The caboose held a good-sized gang by the time we reached Toronto.

Sometimes we played snooker, but most of the time we just sat around and spat at the stove or jawed with one another. We were all pretty tired and, like a bunch of animals, had our hearts set on one thing: a long winter's rest. But five

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days and nights behind thirty cars of cattle was a sensation not to be forgotten quickly. I tried to construct from memory the fragrance of flowers and of clean things for my own personal reasons; but it was no use. Fact proved stronger than fancy.

We passed through the localities where, when I had come up, wheat had reached unbroken for hundreds of miles. Now the vast land lay white and bare. Under the coverlid of winter, the earth was stirring through its brownish clay loam, slowly enriching itself for future harvests. We passed through great forests whose trees glowered stark and black from the white carpet spread about them. Whole days seemed to be taken up in going through forests; but that is not to be wondered at since a third of Saskatchewan alone consists of a densely wooded area. Through the muskeg and the brush, glaring so under the winter sun that it made eyes ache if they looked too long, and so eastward, during the last days nearing civilization more rapidly with each receding mile.

The journey was a ghostly panorama of a sleeping land; a white, quiescent land so still that it seemed under the spell of Death, but a land that

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would spring suddenly into abundant newness of life with the first promise of warmth. Canada is like a child that sleeps soundly. The winters are so heavy and intense that the land rests well. Her great mineral wealth, her noisy navigable waters, her lush forests and fertile farms, all lie locked in the cold embrace of winter. For a few months there is silence and pallor everywhere, the breathless hush of life waiting for release. Then the spring! I think that rich and very human land must almost go mad when the spring spells awakening and freedom! Canada's winter sleep is well deserved and well taken, sufficient reason why the crops are such famous contenders for world honors.

Thinking over my months of hard work, fun, adventure, exploration into my own self and discoveries all about me, I felt tremendously invigorated and inspired. It was as if I had harnessed to myself all the power of the wild but fecund Northwestern land, and as if from now on I could use that vitality and force to good advantage. For four months I had been living the life of a man of the wilds, sleeping the sleep that comes to a man of the wilds, thinking the thoughts that are part of a man of the wilds—and they are

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those of a definitely free and liberated spirit. I had been tutoring in the technique of getting on with others. I had measured my own strength of body against other men, my own strength of soul against primitive conditions. It made me feel competent and eager to meet further situations. For I realized, too, that all I had met and learned up North was utterly wasted unless I could put the fundamentals of it to the test wherever I might be—North or East, in the wild or among civilized folk.

It was almost Thanksgiving and I wanted to get home for that. Turkey dinner and mince pie! I'd never been so thankful in all my life. I had forgotten how my back used to ache when working in the fields and how my muscles used to cry out for release from toil: all I could remember clearly was the golden panorama of growing wheat and the utter magnificence of my experience.

In Toronto, I wondered why everyone looked at me as I walked through the streets. Women leaned from their autos. Girls giggled. Men stared. I began to think that I must be a pretty good-looking fellow, walking along with my big, graceful dog. My chest went out an inch or two farther. My smile undoubtedly broadened.

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Ronno, taking the cue, stepped a little higher and held his tail so the white tip waved like a victorious flag. I was thoroughly conscious of the fact that I was creating a vivid impression, for wherever I went people turned and watched me down the street. Sunning myself in my own vanity, I reveled in attracting so much attention. Then I saw myself in a plate-glass window! And I saw, too, why people had stared at me.

They were civilized. I was not.

I marveled at the sublime obliviousness that egotism can give a man. Here I, who had strutted along as proud and self-conscious as any prince, was really a ludicrous creature. I had forgotten that I was an alien. Though I had the soul of a civilized white man, my material disguise proclaimed me an untamed thing from the wilds. It was hard for me to realize that I was different from these people, who were, after all, my people. I was so accustomed to myself in Northwestern garb that I had completely disregarded my odd appearance. So I ducked into the first hotel.

There was some hesitancy about accepting me, but I discovered that in such moments it is a great comfort to have along a dog almost as big as

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oneself whose fangs will go up greedily at the least flicker of eyelashes.

I had grown quite fond of my beard. It was thick and rusty from the wheat, but it had served to give me a decidedly Samsonian complex, so I endured heartfelt pangs when the barber did a ten-man job on me and shaved it off. Then a masseuse got hold of me. It was the softest thing I ever hope to feel this side of Paradise, and meaning by that—*never again!* But *clean* after it? I fairly shone. After that a little manicurist came along. She had a fine time digging the accumulation of almost four months out of my nails. It was just about an all-day job for those several people to get me back into civilian shape again, but I know they enjoyed it. It is always satisfying to see definite improvement; and mine was not only definite—it was elaborate and alarming.

After I was in the most immaculate shape I had ever been in, with my only consolation the dull hope that I looked respectable, I got a room and reveled in the novel joy of a tub; then I donned a newly purchased suit of clothes and sallied forth again—not to be stared at any longer, to my intense disappointment. But poor Ronno!

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At the first sight of me in mufti, he turned a look of utter disgust upon his once-revered master; only his limp tail wagging feebly told me that he would try to learn to love me all over again.

The next time I saw myself in a plate-glass window I felt contemptuous: it seemed as if I had shrunk to about half my size!

That night I felt out of place riding down to New York on a sleeper, when I was so used to a caboose, and my sleep was scattered with dreams of the North; the land that was fading from me as the dreams were. Jimmie was there, whose life had gone so quietly with the passing of summer. And Fat, that roistering, jolly fellow. Blackeye Magge, who had got the best of me and whom I had then shown where to get off. The Macks—her kindness and his sullen determination over the harvest. Speed, my fleet and willing pony. The long days, the nights, the work, the play—and Olsen, blunt pal and staunch helpmate. All took one last kaleidoscopic parade through my dreams: the triumphant cavalcade of a glorious experience. All lingered against a background of swaying grain. Then the background fell away. The wheat was milled and had become loaves of bread on people's tables. The

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doors had closed on a great and beautiful adventure.

It took me a long time to adjust myself during the days that followed. Shoes were always too tight, no matter how big I got them. Neat trousers made me feel shamefully undressed after the saggy pants I had been wearing. A coat and vest were in the way. I longed for a mile-long woolen muffler to tie around my throat. Rooms were stuffy, yet I was never warm enough, for I couldn't find a stove I could get right up to and hug. I missed the stale smell of tobacco juice. I had to learn that the anecdotes we had thought side-splitting in the bunkhouse were not choice bits for an evening's conversation. My tongue felt curiously tied. In the North, we never bothered to speak unless it was (1) to answer some one directly addressing us, (2) to make a joke, (3) to comment on the weather. In the East, people seemed to want to talk all the time about nothing that mattered very much. It was new and strange to me. As for that blessed living memory of the North, Ronno, it was the first time in his life he ever had to make his meals off meat he had not killed himself. Even the best in butchers' seemed adulterated to him.

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In my dreams I longed for Saskatchewan, that land of roving adventure and endless toil. I thought of it with a grateful heart and always will, as the finest thing in my life: a true adventure because a grand experience. Although I had left those gallant trails of vagabondage behind me, I knew that there were still many trails ahead, and an adventure that would neither cease nor pale nor change: life to be lived as one's ideals proclaimed. For the North had taught me what it meant to have ideals.

Some day I may go back. . . . Perhaps. . . . I don't know. But the glory of it is always with me—and there is Ronno!

